



THE TWILIGHT ZONE

MEMPHIS • THE POOL GUY
A novelization by Jay Russell

MEMPHIS

Based on the Teleplay by Eriq La Salle

ONE

Ray Ellison just got the kind of news all of us dread. But on the worst day of his life, Ray Ellison is also about to get lucky. He's going to have a chance to change his future... by changing his past.

So this is what it's like to be dead.

Ray Ellison's cold eyes stared out lifelessly on the grand sight of the mighty Mississippi flowing relentlessly past. His fingers didn't move; his toes didn't wriggle. His eyes were watery, but the lids wouldn't blink. A fly, a gnat—something small—alighted on his nose, then took off again just as quickly. The bitter April wind that blew in from across the river wiped its feet in his short black hair and sent a shiver through his still bones, cold enough to turn his black skin to gray.

Ray didn't even notice.

Ray had always liked sitting by the riverside. He loved looking at water: ponds, lakes, creeks, streams, the Gulf of Mexico where he'd spent so many summers as a boy. The sight of the Pacific Ocean had blown him away the one time he'd made it out to California. Ray saved up for it for years and oh, what a trip that had been! He had actually spent one entire day of his vacation sitting on a concrete bench at the end of the pier in Santa Monica, just watching those endless waves come crashing in. He'd done nothing else all day, but sit and watch, getting up only to buy a hot dog and soda, then running back to reclaim his hard seat before someone else snatched the blessed spot. He wondered how anyone in Los Angeles, other than the Latino fisherman that leisurely plied their trade beside him at the pier's end, ever got any work done when they had that incredible, vast ocean to look at twenty-four hours a day. And no charge for the pleasure.

He still thought of that day as one of the greatest of his entire life.

Memphis didn't have an ocean, of course—the city couldn't provide a view as awesome and spectacular as the sight of the infinite Pacific from the dock of the bay—but the legendary Mississippi ran a pretty

close second all in all. Ray had always loved the river and everything associated with it: from the tacky souvenir stands along the river walk to Mark Twain. Really, the Mississippi was the thing he liked best about the city. Memphis wasn't a bad place to live and work if he was being honest. It wasn't the greatest place, either, but then Ray would have to admit that he didn't bring the greatest life or lust for life to it. Still, no matter how bad things got—at work or at home—there was always the sight of the Mississippi to make the day better. Ray even loved the damned paddle-wheel gambling boats, which always seemed to be cruising past, soaking the suckers out of their life savings as they rode the currents and worked to recreate a time that existed only in legend and movies.

Ray had never actually been out on the river itself. He couldn't swim and he was deathly afraid of boats (And he was no damn good at gambling: he'd never once even won a lousy sawbuck in the office football pool). No, he just loved watching the water flow past from the safety of the shore, and was perfectly content with that vicarious experience.

And that somehow encapsulated something elemental about Ray Ellison's life.

But now he was dead. Dead as a doornail. That phrase resonated for him now. It was from the first line of some book he remembered having to read in junior high school. What was it now? *A Tale of Two Cities*? No. *A Christmas Carol* maybe? No matter, because the river still flowed past. An audio memory of Paul Robeson's voice singing "Old Man River" began to play in Ray's head. He'd always thought it a corny old song and found Robeson's famous basso profundo rendition slightly absurd. and embarrassing. But not today. Today it was nothing less than writ holy.

Tired of living, but scared of dying.

Amen to that brother man. Amen to that.

A scrawny tomcat—equal parts fleas and mange—came slinking along the concrete walkway that stretched along the riverbank. It stopped to look at Ray's deathly motionless form on the park bench.

Its curiosity had been piqued (Obviously, it didn't heed the warnings held in aphorisms).

The ginger tom cautiously padded its way over toward the bench, lowering itself to a crouch without taking its eyes off Ray's. It measured and evaluated the situation, taking its time as cats always do. The tom suddenly leapt up, and came to a nervous rest on the wooden slats of the bench right next to Ray. It hesitantly stretched out its neck, sniffing at him.

What did it smell? Ray wondered. Could the kitty's superfine shnozzola detect the bleak odor of death and impending decay? Did it inhale the terminal whiff of mortality? Could it smell the end of all things for Ray Ellison?

Or did it just catch the smell of the remnants of the tuna sandwich he'd eaten for lunch?

Ray sneezed suddenly and the cat leapt off the bench in a panic, putting a safe distance between itself and the man on the bench. Ray flexed his fingers; they'd gotten pins and needles from being frozen in place on his lap for so long. He pulled a gray hankie out of his back pocket and blew his nose.

He then sneezed again.

Ray had always been terribly allergic to cats. Dogs too, though he's always thought of himself as more of a dog person than a cat person.

The tom crouched down again and watched nervously from a distance. Its eyes were still locked on Ray's.

"I am a dead man," Ray explained to the cat. "D—E—A—D. Dead. That's what you smell. Along with the tuna."

An elderly woman in a headscarf carrying shopping bags stuffed with green vegetables heard his words and let out an alarmed gasp. She switched the bags to her left hand and made a small gesture at Ray with her right. As if to ward something off. Something evil.

"Damn straight," Ray mumbled at her, and she walked a little faster. A few leaves of Chinese cabbage fell out of a bag as she hurried off. The tom ran over to give them a sniff but decided that Chinese cabbage wasn't anything that it would like. Why was it that no one ever dropped nice juicy mice out of their bags? Life was so unfair.

"D—E—A—D, dead," Ray said again.

The kitty ran away. Ray took it as sign. It was time for this particular dead man to make a move. He stood up.

He blinked the tears out of his eyes.

In a fog, Ray started to walk away from his beloved river and back toward the street. He had to face up to the rest of the day—the rest of his "life"—sooner or later. All things considered, it had probably better be sooner.

A block away, a big yellow Buick Le Sabre—mint 1968, with an engine big as all of Tennessee and a driver high as an elephant's eye—screamed from a changing red light, picking up all kinds of speed as it went. The squeal of burning rubber off the big Goodyear tires turned heads for blocks around.

Only one very distracted head, full to the brim with deathly thoughts, didn't turn. Didn't hear a thing coming.

The yellow Le Sabre roared down the road.

It had all started with smell.

Funny thing is—if you could somehow find anything remotely funny in the situation, and you'd have to be all four Marx Brothers plus Abbott & Costello rolled into one to do it—Ray Ellison wasn't a smelly kind of guy. That is to say, he wasn't the kind of guy who gave much thought to how things smelled. He was aware of his own personal odors, of course, as most people are. He showered every morning and duly triple-rolled his extra-strength antiperspirant under each pit. You couldn't keep a job working for a high-powered law firm, even as a lowly clerk, if the bosses in their expensive suits and fine colognes had to curl their noses every time you got in an elevator with one of them. And he knew what not to eat: the foodstuffs like baked beans, kielbasa, asparagus, and corn chips. They gave him wind potent enough to strip paint off the walls. No, Ray Ellison had no particular problems with his personal hygiene or BO.

It was just that he never really paid all that much attention to how things smelled. Of the five basic senses, it was the one that engaged him the least.

Ray's lack of interest in the smells of the world, killer farts notwithstanding had not done much to foster his romantic fortunes. Not that the ladies were exactly lined up around the block to knock down Ray's door and ravish him with their charms in any event. But on his last date—and it had been so many months ago now that he would have hated to have to admit how long if anyone had asked—it was his sense of smell, or rather his acute lack of a sense of smell, that had done in his evening. Patricia Broulet worked as a receptionist for a legal firm in the same downtown Memphis building in which Ray carried out his sentence. Ray's clerking duties sometimes took him up to the other attorney's offices, where he never failed to let his eyes linger on Patricia as he passed through the lobby.

Through some quirk of fate, Patricia seemed to arrive at the big revolving doors at the main entrance at the same time as Ray every day. And wasn't she a sight, even at eight in the AM on a Monday morning. That smooth skin the creamy color of cocoa, that fine hair dyed Irish Setter red, those pouting thick lips and big brown eyes, those long, muscular legs that ran all the way up to her... Oh, my, Ray thought every single day. *What I wouldn't do for an evening with Patricia?*

Of course, it was typical of Ray Ellison's limited way of thinking that he regarded running into Patricia every day at the revolving doors as a quirk of fate. It would never have occurred to him that there could be some human factor or agency involved in those "chance" meetings. Indeed, it was only some weeks after their disastrous date that Ray realized that Patricia, in fact, took the same standing room only bus to work as he did. He'd never noticed because he always sat in the back, nose buried in his newspaper, while Patricia always stood in the front. Typical Ray.

When Ray finally did get up the nerve to ask Patricia out for a meal, he couldn't believe that she said yes. He took a second shower

that day and used a double dose of deodorant. It didn't matter, though. It wasn't his smell that did in the evening.

"This is a nice place," Patricia had said when they'd settled in at their table.

It was a nice place. Well beyond what Ray could really afford, not that he had much to spend his money on. He had gone so far as to slip the waitress an extra twenty to make sure that they wouldn't have to wait for a very good table. The big crowd waiting at the bar for their table grumped at Ray and Patricia as they waltzed right on past. Patricia had been awfully impressed by that.

Ray ordered the food and wine for them both and the waiter brought them their appetizers. They were very tasty indeed. It was all going so well, what with that certain look in Patricia's eye. While they were waiting for their main courses to arrive, and starting on that second bottle of wine, Ray couldn't help but notice the scent.

"You smell something?" he asked Patricia.

Patricia, who knew all too well how fine she looked and what those muscular legs of hers led to, naturally assumed he was referring to the very pricey perfume she'd bought especially for the occasion. Okay, so she had got it discount from a street vendor and maybe it wasn't a hundred per cent the real designer thing, but it still smelled nice.

"You like it, honey?" she asked with a knowing little smile.

Ray sniffed again. He'd never smelled anything like the scent in his entire life. He couldn't quite put his finger on it and sniffed a little harder. Oh, lordy, it smelled like...

"Wet dog," Ray said nodding and smiling, relieved to have made the identification in his mind. He sneezed.

Allergic, remember?

"Say what?" Patricia shrieked.

"What, what?" Ray replied.

"Are you saying I'm a dog? That I smell like a dog?"

"Huh?" was the best that Ray could muster. Somehow he'd lost track of the conversation and didn't seem to know what Patricia was talking about. That smell was still in his nose though. "Dog?"

"Don't you dog me! This is Chanel Number Five perfume and it is damned expensive. It sure ain't no wet dog. Who you think you talking to like that? Why, I have..."

On and on she went. Ray was left entirely at sea. He stammered and stumbled and felt something cold and heavy settle in the pit of his belly. He was pretty sure it was his testicles retracting. He managed, eventually, to explain himself out of the situation and survive the dinner (and damn, but it turned out to be expensive!). But the evening was destined for an early and entirely unsatisfactory end.

A little like Ray Ellison himself, as things turned out.

The driver of the '68 Le Sabre was seeing things on the road ahead that were most definitely for his eyes only. He wasn't driving: he was flying. And the air stream he flew along was a sizzling, throbbing rainbow of electricity. There was no road in front of him, and there were no buildings or people. He wasn't in Memphis at all.

There was only the sensation of speed and the bodily thrill of pure motion. Without even knowing it or caring, his foot pushed down harder on the gas pedal.

All around, heads turned to follow the sight of the approaching Buick: pedestrians stepped back from the curb, mothers and fathers gripped their children's hands all that much tighter. People shook their heads or wagged their fists at the sight of the speeding yellow bullet and cursed under—or over—their breath at the wanton recklessness of this person who was driving so foolishly on their peaceful city streets.

Ray Ellison, saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing. He was thinking only of death and dead men. He walked right on out into the middle of that street.

The smell haunted Ray for days. Everywhere he went he smelled wet dog. He was constantly sniffing under his arms, blowing into his

hands to check his breath, and making sure there were no skid marks in his skivvies... but he simply couldn't locate the point of origin of the stink. He tried changing his soap, buying some new shampoo, different deodorant, three kinds of toothpaste and mouthwash. He switched his laundry detergent, his dishwashing liquid, and his fabric softener. He rented a carpet shampoo machine and worked his apartment over from wall to wall. He defrosted and washed and scrubbed the fridge and freezer, cleaned his oven inside and out, went through can after can of Lysol.

Wet dog. Everywhere he went: wet dog.

Until one day it was gone.

And the smell of freshly mown grass took its place.

That lasted two days and was a whole lot nicer. It was just as confusing, as there wasn't an inch of lawn anywhere near Ray's third floor walk up, but it was definitely more pleasing. The grass smell was then replaced by the rich, sweet fragrance of just-spun cotton candy. Ray had always liked cotton candy, but that smell only lingered for a half a day and was swept out of his nose (or wherever the odors went) by the less than lovely stench of hot tar. That bit of nastiness lasted two whole weeks.

At which point the headaches started.

And Ray Ellison decided he had better go see a doctor and find out what the hell was going on.

Jim Morrison was screaming out "Hello, I Love You" to the Le Sabre's driver and the driver was feeling that summer of love, love right down to his chemically jazzed toes. Through the windshield, the streets of Memphis were ablaze with fire around him, the wall of flames reaching up to heaven itself. The road in front of the yellow Buick began to melt into a sea of black, as steel rods with razor sharp tips shot up from below. The driver turned the wheel wildly one way then the other to avoid the deadly bolts.

People nearby began screaming at Ray as he wandered out into the street. Hearts skipped beats, breath caught in chests and fearful eyes

were averted. One brave soul took two rash steps in Ray's direction then, eying up the yellow beast that was tearing down the road, thought better of buying a ticket for a deep six holiday with a tombstone that read "HERO."

The Buick's engine roared, its tires squealed and screeched with an elephantine roar between fury and agony.

Ray saw nothing, heard nothing.

He took another step.

Ray had a damned good health insurance policy; it was exactly the same, in fact, as the fancy-pants lawyers at the firm he worked for. They might have been bastards to their clerks but they believed in providing good health insurance. Hell, they were lawyers, so maybe they appreciated the importance of insurance more than most. In any case, Ray was covered for everything under the sun and with no deductible. It was probably the best perk of his job.

So, from the moment he described his problem to the GP, it was less than thirty-six hours before he'd been strapped down and wheeled in for a CT, and less than a day after that when he found himself nervously sitting in the neurologist's office. Doctor Samuel L Tate was a little fellow; African-American like Ray, and not a whole lot older, but about three skin tones lighter. And bald as an eight ball. Doctor Tate had been speaking to Ray for the better part of ten minutes, using a laser pointer to highlight the key features of the tiny pictures of Ray's brain pinned to the light box on the wall. Ray continued to nod every few seconds as the red laser dot bobbed and weaved, but he hadn't really paid much attention to the details after he heard Doctor Tate say the magic words "tumor," "malignant" and "inoperable." Ray thought there might have been a couple of "sorries" mentioned and something about chemotherapy, but the rest just sailed right on over his cancer-filled head.

"Mr Ellison? Mr Ellison?"

"Huh?" Ray said.

"Are you still with me?" Doctor Tate asked.

"Uh-huh. Still here," Ray replied. "For now."

"I know that this is an enormous shock," Doctor Tate began.

"It's a biggie," Ray said, nodding. "Yeah, it's, uh, definitely a, umm, you know... what you said. Shock and shit. Isn't that what they called that attack on Iraq?"

"It is a shock. I understand that. And, of course, we will do everything we can to make and keep you as comfortable as possible."

"New pillow," Ray said.

"Beg pardon?"

"To be comfortable. I'm gonna need a new pillow."

The doctor smiled wryly despite himself and the situation. "Of course, we'll take care of that, not to worry."

"Comfortable," Ray repeated.

"Mr Ellison?"

"Yeah."

"Is there anything that you would like to ask me?"

Ray shook his head at first. And as he did so the smell of Good 'n Plenty which had been with him for six hours faded, to be replaced by the odor of freshly-mixed plaster. He gathered his thoughts. He took a deep breath and asked the question that everyone in his situation asks. Has to ask. The question that even good and caring doctors like Samuel L Tate hate most, but know they'll be obliged to answer because, for heaven's sake, it's the question that they would ask, too, if the positions were reversed.

"How long have I got?" Ray said.

Doctor Tate took in and let out a long breath. "That's always a hard thing to know for sure. Every patient is different: every tumor and every kind of cancer reacts in a slightly different way. I can give you a ballpark figure, but there's no guarantee that what I say will be anything like a hundred per cent right. No one can answer the question that you are asking for certain."

"Just take me out to the ballpark, Doc," Ray said. "How long have I got?"

"Five months? Maybe six." Doctor Tate told him.

"Oh, man," Ray moaned. He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers to his temples. *Could this really be happening to me?* Ray wondered.

"It could be longer, of course," Doctor Tate said. "Maybe as long as... nine months. Even ten is inside the realm of possibility."

"What about shorter?" Ray asked.

Doctor Tate held Ray's gaze. He was a good doctor.

"It could also be shorter," he said, nodding. "Maybe as little as three months. But I don't think so. If you were me, I would plan on five. But I'd also be prepared for anything. Get my affairs in order. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ray opened his eyes and nodded his head. "At least I won't have the headaches once I'm dead, huh? Or these damn smells. I mean: you don't keep livestock in here, do you?"

Doctor Tate only offered the slightest of shrugs. Even the best of doctors can only do so much.

"It's okay, Doc. That was supposed to be a joke."

The two men sat briefly in silence. Doctor Tate glanced at the little digital clock on the corner of his desk. Ray caught it.

"I... I got to ask you this, Doc. Is there anything, anything that can be done? I mean experimental treatments, surgery, drugs? Hell I'll try voodoo. I mean is there anything at all that I can do?"

Doctor Tate started to shake his head, then stopped. He stood up and walked over to the light box, running a finger over the scans of Ray's brain, before coming to rest on that dark blotch of a tumor. He turned to Ray, opened his mouth to speak, but stopped.

"What is it?" Ray asked.

Doctor Tate hesitated.

"WHAT?" Ray demanded. "C'mon, Doc, what could I possibly have to lose?"

"You said you work for a law firm, is that right?"

"Yeah."

"But you're not a lawyer."

"No way. I'm not even a paralegal. Just a clerk."

"I'm guessing that you don't have a lot of money then," the doctor said.

"Doctor Tate. I drive a twelve year-old Subaru, which was a piece of shit when it was new. I owe five grand on my Visa and another three on my MasterCard. And with all that I tell myself that I'm

sitting in fat city 'cos I spring for the deluxe cable package with the extra movie channels."

"I see."

"What would money do for me, Doc? Would it buy me a longer life?"

Doctor Tate let out a long, thin breath. Ray could see him thinking.

"There is a neurosurgeon here in Memphis. He's good, really good. And he's recently established a new therapeutic program. It's an extremely radical treatment for brain tumors. Cutting edge surgical techniques, if you'll pardon the expression, combined with what amounts to untested but highly promising stem cell treatments."

"Sounds fucking great, if you'll pardon my expression," Ray said, excitedly. "So how do I sign up? What's the catch?"

"The catch," Tate said, with another sigh, "is that it is profoundly expensive."

"Oh, man, I got like the best medical insurance in town. It's the only good thing I do have. It's..."

Doctor Tate was already shaking his head.

"No. No insurance in the world would cover something like this. It is a completely experimental treatment, way out of the bounds of normal or accepted practice. This doctor, and it is amazing that he has even been able to do it, has obtained permission to carry out his experiments, but none of it has been formally approved by the FDA or anyone else. The insurance company would never consider it. Not for one second."

Ray had stood up without even realizing it. "Well, how much does it cost then?"

"Surgery, rehabilitation, meds, follow-up... I don't know for sure, but if I had to guess I'd say at a minimum you're looking at half-a-million dollars. Possibly more. And the treatment would invalidate any insurance you have."

Ray collapsed back down into his chair. "Oh, man," he wheezed.

"Is there any way you could raise that kind of money?"

"Hell yeah," Ray said with a sad laugh, "I'll just sell my body on the streets. Let's see, at five bucks a pop? No, I'm gonna need more than those five months you offered me."

"Maybe there's a house you could sell? Stocks? Assets of any kind?"

"I just told you, man. I got eight large in credit card debt alone. I'm a Wal-Mart shopper, Doc. And I never yet seen a blue light special on stem cells at the 'Mart."

Doctor Tate searched the office with his eyes, as if a loose half-million might be dangling from a ceiling tile.

"Do you have any family who could help? Or friends? Some of those lawyers you work for?" he asked.

Ray just shook his head, laughed at that final notion. "No one. No one at all." He spied a photograph in a silver frame on the doctor's desk: a family portrait of Tate with his wife and four children. All smiling, and looking as happy as a black Brady Bunch.

"It's a funny thing," Ray said, a rueful smile forming at the corner of his lips.

"What's that?" Doctor Tate gently asked.

"Now that I'm... dying." Ray shook his head again. "Goddamn, I'm dying. Huh. Now that I'm dying, I realize that it really ain't much of a life that I'm leaving behind. Deluxe cable package, Subaru and all."

There was nothing left for Doctor Tate—or Ray—to say.

Sometimes a song gets stuck in your head. A song you don't even like or might actually hate. An awful pop song from some teen idol, or a kid's TV show, or a commercial jingle. It just sticks in your head like toilet paper on the heal of your shoe and no matter how hard you try, you just can't make it go away.

I'm a dead man, I'm a dead man, I'm a dead man. That was the awful jingle that blared at 120 decibels in Ray Ellison's mind's ear. It wasn't much of a tune. No beat, you definitely couldn't dance to it. Not the kind of ditty you'd be humming to yourself when you walked out of a Broadway show.

But Ray couldn't make the song go away as he walked out of the big medical building that housed Doctor Tate's office. It just played over and over, louder and louder in his head with every step he took.

The words filled his ears, and played in front of his eyes as if scrolling across some IMAX sized karaoke screen of the world. Ray couldn't hear the passers-by screaming their warnings at him over the "I'm a dead-man" chorus as he stepped off the curb. He didn't hear the screech of the yellow Buick's tires or Jim Morrison screaming through the Le Sabre's bass-heavy speakers. It was only at the last possible second—as three thousand pounds of prime, yellow Detroit steel was nearly on top of him—that some shard of self-preservation broke through the thick miasma of his woe and pricked something in Ray's consciousness.

He turned his head and saw the Le Sabre about to mow him down; the driver with his eyes closed someplace else entirely. Incredibly, Ray had time to say out loud:

"Shit, I really am a dead man."

And take a half-step back.

There was a moment of splendid flight.

And then there was nothing but blackness.

TWO

Ray opened his eyes.
He screamed bloody murder.
He closed his eyes.

The reason was simple: a steely cold spike of pain that ran through his head; from a spot in the middle of his forehead, almost exactly halfway between his eyes, right back to a point at the base of his neck where he could feel the frayed label of his Wal-Mart T-shirt scraping the hairs that were overdue for a trim. The pain was worse than any of the tumor headaches he had experienced, and through the sharp agony he somehow formed the coherent thought that Doctor Tate must have been wrong about the five months on offer, and that these were his death throes right here and now. The tumor simply couldn't wait another second to kill him.

Maybe it was just as well that it should happen this way. Did Ray really want to have to make that painful slog through his few remaining months, thinking that everything he saw and did was going to be for the last time? He imagined the lines that would run through his head with each experience:

That was my last Big Mac.
That was my last toenail clipping.
That was my last jiffy lube.
That was my last episode of *Survivor*.
(Okay, so maybe it wouldn't be all bad).
That was my last... last thought!

Maybe it was better for the whole thing, for Ray Ellison, just to end quickly and suddenly, with only this one, monstrous bolt of pain. Then he wouldn't have to suffer an extended and humiliating interlude into failure of body and mind. Not to mention soul. Like most people who dare to even think about it, Ray had always imagined that the best way to go would be peacefully, in his sleep (preferably at age one hundred and six). But if you couldn't have that blessing then maybe being run down in the street—wham, bam, good-bye ma'am—might not be as bad as it seemed.

Though at the moment, if he could muster the cognition to do so, Ray would have had to admit that being run down in the street felt pretty damn bad.

"Excuse me, pardon me. I'm trying to come through here, please. Could you move, sir?"

Somebody was talking and it didn't sound like Saint Peter (though how Ray would know what Saint Peter sounded like was something of an open question). But this was a female voice. Very womanly, but authoritative.

"Would you please move out of the way? I'm a nurse and I'm trying to help."

Ray braced himself and opened his eyes again.

An oh-so-lovely face loomed in his pained sight; an angel, it could only be an angel. And one with fine, black skin all dressed in heavenly white. Her beautiful green eyes took Ray in with great concern; her rich, red lips set in an expression of determination. She wore tiny pearl earrings that glowed with the reflected energy of the midday sun. Patricia the receptionist wasn't fit to paint this angel's toenails.

"Ohhh," Ray sighed.

"Don't speak," she said. "Don't try to move at all just yet."

She ran her hands down Ray's arms then gently felt all around his neck with her fingertips. She pressed a finger to his carotid to feel for a pulse and glanced at her watch. She nodded to herself. Ray couldn't take his eyes off the woman's face. She had delicate features and broad smile lines around her eyes. Her ears had the biggest lobes he had ever seen. Cute lobes, though. He thought she must be the most beautiful thing in the entire world. Then another spike of pain shot through his skull and he closed his eyes and groaned again. Bright fireworks went off inside his eyelids; a full Fourth of July display. When he was able to open his eyes again, a boy of about ten came into his sights as well. The boy, who looked so much like the angel that he could only be her son, loomed just over his mother's right shoulder. He looked scared, but excited and interested. As if Ray was a bird with a busted wing that he had stumbled over in the park. He half-expected the kid to start prodding him with a stick.

"Hey," Ray coughed.

The boy nodded at him, with a charming hint of a smile. He sure had his mother's fine looks.

Ray turned his gaze back to the woman. "Who... who are you?" he managed to ask.

"My name is Adelaide. Adelaide Tyler. I'm a nurse, don't worry."

"You're beautiful," Ray muttered.

Adelaide smiled. "Can you tell me if you are in any pain? Does anything in particular hurt you?"

"My head," Ray said, and as if on-cue, another searing bolt shot through the center of his skull. He winced with the pain and let out a sharp exhalation of breath.

"There is a very strong possibility that you're concussed," she told him. She gently ran her fingers through his hair, carefully turning his head to one side. "That was quite a knock you took. You actually went airborne. I think you are extremely lucky not have been killed by that maniac."

"It's not that, it's the..." Ray was having trouble keeping his thoughts together. Everything was getting fuzzy in his sight and in his mind. "It's the, uh, whatchamacallit in my, you know..."

"It were a Buick," the little boy said. "An ugly yellow Buick. And man did it ever take off after it hit you. That sucker done ran."

"Lucas!" the nurse chided.

"Buick," Ray said, nodding. "I remember now. That's right, it was yellow. Like a killer canary. A really old model, too. Cherry, though."

"Naw, I saw it and it were brand-new, mister," the boy said. He looked at his mom and twirling his finger beside his temple, made a "he's crazy" gesture. His mother snarled at him: "Lucas!"

"Yeah, definitely an old one," Ray said, to himself as much as to the boy. He noticed then that the boy had a large, dark birthmark across the upper portion of his left cheek.

"Can you tell me your name, mister?" Adelaide asked. "Do you know who you are?"

Ray nodded, then winced.

"Ray's my name. Ray, um, errr... wait. I'll remember in a minute. It's not a hard question, is it?"

Adelaide's look of concern deepened. Someone behind her laughed with a sound like a spoon caught in a garbage disposal. Ray was able to twist his neck and noticed that a considerable crowd had formed in a circle around them. There was something funny about all the people, but Ray couldn't quite put his finger on it. His vision—his head—was just too fuzzy. Other than himself, Adelaide and Lucas—he assumed that was the boy's name—the crowd was all white, but that wasn't what was strange. It was their clothes, he realized. The whole mass of them was dressed in some weird retro style. All the men wore starched white shirts with such narrow ties. Maybe they were on their way to a party or a film festival or something. Was there a new print of *Reservoir Dogs* on release?

"What's going on here?" Ray asked, shaking his head. That was a bad idea so he stopped.

"You got hit by a car, Ray," Adelaide said. "You took one heck of a spill. I think you hit your head pretty hard when you landed and you have probably suffered a degree of concussion. Near as I can tell, though, the damage doesn't appear to be as bad as it could have been. Can you tell me what day it is?"

Ray finally raised his head off the ground and perched on his elbows to get a better look around him. Adelaide helped to prop him up and the boy tried to be of assistance by taking hold of one of his arms. Something very definitely was not right here. The cars driving past on the street—most slowing to stop and rubberneck at Ray and his crowd—were all vintage vehicles. Ray had never been big on cars, like anyone who owns a Subaru, but he could have sworn he saw a mint green Corvair cruise by.

"Talk about living dangerously," he muttered. "Unsafe at any speed."

"How's that?" Adelaide said.

"Is there a classic car show in town? Is that what these people are all dressed up for?"

Everyone around him was wearing clothes that were not merely out of date, but way too style less to ever work as a nutty retro fad. Some stuff just never comes back. Which, he saw, could be a good thing.

"Can you tell me what the date is?" Adelaide tried again.

A white man, in an ill-fitting seersucker suit and porkpie hat so dated he must have found it at the bottom of a trunk in the worst junk shop in town, walked up to have a look to see what the fuss was all about. He asked someone else what had happened. Ray heard an especially nasty-looking piece of senior citizen white trash reply: "That stupid looking colored boy got hisself hit by a car. Shoulda seen that black crow fly!" And the two of them laughed.

"Colored boy?" Ray muttered. Then his head began to feel fuzzy again. He blinked his eyes and tried to shake it off. He looked up again. The angel Adelaide was still holding onto his hand, and Lucas was hopping from one foot to another behind her. Ray realized that something else in this crazy picture wasn't right. The glass and steel tower of the medical building with Doctor Tate's office should have been just to his left; but there was nothing there at all. Just an open square affording a view of his favorite river. In fact, none of the buildings around him looked right.

"Wait a minute," Ray said. "Where am I?"

"You're in Memphis, Ray. Don't you know?" Adelaide said.

"Memphis. Yeah, of course. Where else would I be? But where in the world is the..."

Ray winced as another streak of pain ricocheted around his skull like a pinball racking up a free game.

"Stay with me, Ray," Adelaide said. "Don't go to sleep now!"

When the pain passed—though this time the fuzziness lingered, and got worse even—Ray opened his eyes. He licked his lips, which suddenly felt very dry, and tried to swallow. Everything, but everything, looked wrong to him.

"What... What year is this?" Ray asked.

The boy, Lucas, let out a little giggle. "It's 1968, mister. Don't you even know that?"

"Lucas!" his mother hissed. The boy slumped his shoulders looking cowed.

"19..." Ray shook his head as the world started to spin out of control around him. Darkness began setting in once again.

Somewhere out of the darkness he heard the foulness of the word "nigger" followed by a chorus of uproarious laughter.

"That can't be," Ray whispered. "It just can't be."

Pain, and then blessed blackness, consumed him once again.

THREE

Ray had a dream.

In the dream, he was a little boy again, walking through a vast, fragrant meadow with his mother. The meadow spread wide as the eye could see and millions of flowers of all different colors shimmied and billowed in a gentle, cool breeze. It was like walking through a fabulous pointillist painting. Ray held tightly to his mother's hand and looked up into her loving, dark brown eyes as she smiled down at him. It felt so nice just to touch her hand again after so many years, to feel the warmth of her soft skin against his own. He squeezed her fingers tightly in his small fist and she let out her roar of a laugh. Ray laughed too, and as if thinking with a single mind, they both started to run through the flowers: mother and son holding hands, no one and nothing else in the entire world but that perfect meadow and that infinite, perfect motherly love to encompass him and make him happy.

Ray's heart swelled in his chest with the sheer ecstasy of it. The feeling of safety, of security, of purest joy in the simplicity and sanctity of the moment overwhelmed him. He wanted to stay there, just like that forever and ever. Just running and leaping and dancing through that carpet of soft color, with his mama holding his hand and nothing else in the world but love and happiness to surround him and fill him up from top to toe. What could be more perfect?

And then she was gone.

And Ray was no longer a boy, but a grown man. And he remembered everything. He remembered that his mother was dead; had been dead so many long years. He remembered the stomach cancer that ate her up so slowly and took all that beauty, all that warmth and all that love away from him. He remembered how cold her hands had felt in those last months before she died. Her skin had grown hard and chilled, the fingers more often than not curled into claws from the pain that tore through her, that racked her every waking moment. He just wanted to touch his mama's warm smooth skin once more. Just a touch, just one more second of that dream

feeling that only she could give him: that everything was right, everything was safe, everything was perfect.

Ray looked around him.

He was still standing in the middle of the meadow, but the flowers had all died. The world around him slipped into time-lapse and the flower heads dried up and dropped as he watched. The world of color drained away like water from a dirty tub, leaving a vast plain of brown mulch and decay. The wind picked up and turned cold. Sharp, frigid fingers poked at his eyes and his ribs. He tried to pull his coat closer around himself, but the thin fabric tore, exposing his puckered skin to the harshness of the elements. He was naked. The sun faded, too, and the darkness brought more cold and the distant, menacing howls of strange beasts. Ray shivered and wrapped his arms around his exposed body, but the wind found its way through. It enveloped him and chilled him to the marrow. He felt a desperate need to piss, so he pressed his hands to his crotch and crossed his legs to stop the urine from spraying out of its own accord.

Then he heard a noise, above the awful howls.

A throbbing engine; it was big and loud, and it was coming toward him from somewhere. Was it behind him? Was it ahead? Ray couldn't tell. He looked all around, but in the thickening darkness, he couldn't see more than a few yards in any direction.

The engine got louder and louder. The vehicle that housed it had to be immense. House-sized. Dinosaur-sized. Impossibly big.

Ray lifted his hands as if to ward off whatever it was that was headed his way. The roar was now coming from his right... no, from the left. He turned one way, then the other. He still couldn't make out where the noise was coming from, though it was now so deafeningly loud it must be almost on top of him. He felt a stream of urine drizzle down his leg and was sorely ashamed.

He was terrified.

Ray spun around and saw a blur of yellow speeding straight at him. The noise of the roaring engine filled his head. It was the only sound in the world. He opened his mouth to cry out but was drowned out by the ferocious scream of the engine. Then he lost his voice and nothing came out of his mouth at all. The screaming yellow force was

on top of him and even if he could have moved there was no place for him to run, nowhere to hide.

He had time only for a nano-flash of memory: the warm touch of his mother's hand in his own.

"Mama!" Ray Ellison yelled.

He woke up.

"Goddamn," Ray said.

Someone gasped.

Ray looked over and saw the face of a little boy staring back at him in the murky light. The boy was sitting in a hard backed chair next to the bed. Ray was lying on the bed. He had no idea where that bed was, or where he was. He looked around the room.

The bedroom was small, but warm and tidy. He lay on a narrow, single bed crammed into one corner beneath a small, tacky portrait of Jesus. A pine nightstand with only a wind-up alarm clock on it stood beside the bed. The clock ticked loudly, but the small hand was missing. It was a quarter-past some hour or the other.

Ray continued his survey of the room. A freestanding, if somewhat battered mahogany wardrobe occupied most of the opposite corner of the room. The door was half ajar and the wardrobe seemed to be full of colorful, frilly dresses. A low dresser stood next to the wardrobe. The two didn't match at all. The top of the dresser was covered with lace doilies. In the middle of each doily stood a picture frame. The frame on the right held the photograph of an elderly couple, sitting on a park bench. The old man clutched onto a walking stick and offered the camera a sour expression; the old woman smiled falsely, seeming slightly embarrassed for, or about, what could only be her husband. The second frame, an ornate silver job, featured a snapshot of a very handsome young black man in an army uniform. He looked about twenty with the world at his feet. He had a movie star's glint in his eye that made Ray think the man could charm fish into a net. Ray had never in his entire life owned a suit of clothing that fitted or suited him as well as that young man's army uniform looked on him.

The last picture—and the largest of the three—was of the boy who was now sitting in the chair next to Ray. He was a very tiny baby in

the photo, probably no more than three or four months old, but there was no mistaking the identity. The baby—like the boy—was entirely adorable, but he also had a large, dark birthmark across most of his left cheek. A port wine stain, Ray suddenly remembered that it was called. He'd seen a documentary on the Discovery Channel about how hard they were to remove, though apparently they could do it with lasers. This boy's was a whopper.

Ray glanced back over at the boy, who continued to observe Ray as if he was some specimen under a glass case in the museum or a curiosity at the freak show. The boy still hadn't said a word to him. Ray tried to raise his head off the pillow but stopped when he felt a fresh detonation of pain behind his right ear.

"Shit!" he said, involuntarily closing his eyes and falling back onto the pillow. "Go—o—o—ddamn!"

The boy let out another gasp. The pain rolled back forth between Ray's ears like a spiked ball for a minute, before dissipating to a tolerable level. When he opened his eyes again Ray saw that the boy was now looking at him wide-eyed, with his mouth hanging open as well.

"What?" Ray croaked. He cleared his throat and tried it again: "What?"

"You said a really bad word," the boy told him.

"Did I?" Ray had already forgotten what he said. "Sorry."

"You said a bad word before, too. Out on the street. My mama doesn't let me ever use words like that. She don't even like it when I say 'heck.'"

"Heck?" Ray asked. "You're me, kidding right?"

The boy shook his head. As if from a dream, Ray suddenly remembered an image of the boy dancing around a woman on the street. He also remembered her scolding him by name. What the hell was it?

Leonard?

Larry?

"Lucas!" Ray said, as the name came into his head and out of his lips all at once.

"That's me," the boy nodded. "I'm Lucas."

Ray nodded at him.

"Lucas James Tyler, actually," the boy added. "James was my Daddy's name."

And he pointed with his chin toward the photo of the handsome black man in the silver frame atop the dresser. Ray looked at the man's face again. He glanced at Lucas, then back at the photo. Then at the boy again. He could see now that the man could only be Lucas's dad. The birthmark and a decade or so notwithstanding, the boy was a dead ringer for the man in uniform.

"My daddy's dead," Lucas announced. "He got killed in the war."

Iraq or Afghanistan, Ray assumed, but he wasn't about to question the poor kid about it. Ray didn't really know what to say.

"You been asleep a real long time," Lucas said, picking up the slack.

Ray took another look at the amputee alarm clock. It was now almost half-past something or other.

"What time is it?" Ray asked.

Lucas smiled when he looked at the busted clock.

"I broke it," he announced. "I was playing with it, setting off the alarm. I like the way the bells vibrate when it rings. Only, I dropped it and the big hand busted off."

"Why do you keep it?" Ray asked.

"My mama likes it," Lucas said with a shrug. "My daddy bought it a long time ago."

"Hmm," was all Ray could think to say.

"My mom was pretty mad when I broke it. It were just an accident, though. I didn't mean to do it."

"I'm sure you didn't.'

"Your watch is in here," Lucas said. He leaned over and opened the small drawer in the nightstand. He pulled out Ray's digital watch and handed it to him. Ray tried to get up on his elbows again, but no sooner had he raised his head than another bottle rocket exploded inside and he flopped back down. This was getting to be an issue.

"What time does it say?" Ray asked, clutching at his head again.

"Four dot dot two five. And the dot dot keeps flashing on and off. What's that mean?"

"What are you talking about? It's a digital watch. It's four twenty five. The colon flashes the seconds. Right?"

Lucas's eyes opened wide and he shook his head and shrugged his shoulders.

"What?" Ray asked. "You telling me you ain't ever seen a digital watch before? Jeez, my man, you must have pulled them out of cereal boxes before. Or what about the clock on your VCR? To set the timer?"

"Huh?" Lucas said. He scrunched up his features with bewilderment. The port wine stain creased and seemed to grow across his face as he did so.

Ray took another look around the room. There wasn't much in the way of frills to be seen. No radio on the nightstand, no TV in the corner, not even a small one. In fact, there were no pieces of electronics at all. He glanced at the furniture again: the battered wardrobe, the discretely covered dresser, and realized that the mattress beneath him was on the thin and lumpy side. He realized that however tidy and proudly kept it might be, this was probably not a moneyed house.

Then he realized that he had no idea what house it was at all.

"Where am I, Lucas?" Ray said.

The little boy made a what-you-talking-about face. "This is my house. And my Mom's, of course."

"Of course. I know that, but—"

Ray's head was suddenly starting to spin again. He tried to shake the cobwebs off, but it was a tough call. He suddenly felt very nauseous and thought he was going to heave all over the blanket. He felt his gorge rise in his throat, but managed to swallow the hot acid back into his stomach. It burned his throat as it slid back down where it belonged. Ray closed his eyes and took a deep breath and the bout of nausea passed.

But something else continued to nag at him, gnawing away at his thoughts through the pain and discomfort. A memory. Something that the boy had said to him. Out on the street. What had it been?

The street.

He'd been crossing the street when the big yellow car had just appeared. It was on top of him before he had even realized what was happening. He'd been on his way back from...

"The doctor," Ray said. He closed his eyes and it all came flooding back on him like a torrent. Doctor Tate's office. The diagnosis of brain cancer. A dead man walking the streets of Memphis only to get hit by a car.

"A yellow car," Ray said out loud.

"You got hit," Lucas said, nodding. "Hard."

"No shit, Sherlock," Ray muttered.

Lucas gasped again and Ray felt bad. Though Lucas looked to be about ten, he was obviously a pretty sheltered kid to be so shocked by a few mild curse words. Probably religious, Ray thought, glancing up again at the portrait of Jesus on the wall. It looked like the kind of thing that had been purchased from a cheesy door-to-door salesman. Ray bet that there was an overpriced, fake-leather bible that went with it.

Not that Ray was the kind of guy to ever rush into judgments.

"I'm sorry, Lucas. I should be more careful about my language." Ray offered up an apologetic smile. "I guess you ain't exactly into 2Pac or 50 Cent."

"Huh?" Lucas said.

"Nothing," Ray said and chuckled.

But in his head he was still trying to play back the exact sequence of events that had happened out on the street. Now he could remember the car looming up on him and although he didn't recall the actual moment of impact—mercifully, he guessed—he could also now remember coming to on the asphalt. He remembered the crowd around him and Lucas's mom tending to him as he lay on the ground. But there was something else that had happened. Something that nagged at the edge of his consciousness. Something that someone had said. He remembered a voice...

It was the boy, Lucas. He had said it. Ray remembered now. He had been so confused, everything was so unclear. Ray had asked where he was and then... what year it was? Why had he asked that? How confused could he have been?

And then the boy's answer came flooding into his head.

It's 1968, Mister. Don't you even know that?

Ray raised himself up on his elbows all of a sudden. Pain roared through his head and little flowery explosions—daffodil suicide bombers—went off in front of his eyes. But none of that could stop him now. His heart was racing in his chest and he found himself breathing hard. Ray reached out with his right hand and grabbed hold of Lucas's arm. The boy started to giggle, but stopped when Ray's grip became too tight. His eyes narrowed with a hint of discomfort, but he didn't move or try to pull away.

"What year?" Ray demanded of the boy. "What year is it, Lucas? Tell me now."

"I already told you before," Lucas said. He looked a little anxious now and started to squirm. He tried to wriggle out of Ray's grasp, but the vice grip grew tighter. Ray had to have the answer to his question.

"Tell me the year, Lucas!" Ray insisted.

"1968! It's 1968. What do you think?"

Ray let Lucas's arm go and fell back onto the bed. Lucas took a step toward the door then stopped. He could see the pain on Ray's face and he wasn't the type of kid to run away from any kind of trouble. He was pretty fearless, actually. Lucas sat himself back down in the chair and studied Ray very hard.

"You all right, mister?"

Ray shook his head from side to side. It hurt like hell, but somehow he couldn't make himself stop.

"It can't be," he said. "It just can't be."

He repeated the words over and over. He pressed his fists into his eyes and started to moan.

"Mister?" Lucas asked. A hint of panic had come into his voice. He stood back up and approached Ray who was moaning on the bed. He gently touched a finger to Ray's arm. "Hey, mister? You okay?"

"Lucas!" a voice called out. "What in the world do you think you're doing to that man?"

The boy drew back his hand and stepped away from the bed. He went and stood behind the wooden chair he had been sitting on when

Ray woke up.

"Lucas, did I not tell you to go outside and play? Three times now? Did I not specifically tell you to stay out of this bedroom and to let the poor man get his rest? Did I?"

The woman stood in the doorway. She had a bowl of water held in her hands, a washcloth and a towel draped over either arm. She was none other than the black angel in white who had tended to Ray in the street. She was out of her nurse's uniform now and wore a flowery housecoat long enough to reach her ankles. Fluffy pink slippers—just a little too short at the toes and heel—poked out from beneath the frayed hem. The outfit was about as sexy as your grandma's underwear, but Ray still thought she looked gorgeous. He tried to remember her name. He knew she'd told it to him as she tended to him out on the street.

"Adeline," he whispered.

The woman smiled on one side of her mouth. And what a fine mouth it was: thick plum lips that looked as soft as pillows and as tasty as Santa Rosa plums.

"Adelaide," the lips informed him. "Adelaide Tyler. You've obviously met my boy, Lucas."

Ray studied his benefactor. She was tall and slim, but he could tell that beneath the frumpy housecoat she was clearly endowed with very womanly curves. Her straight black hair was immaculately trimmed to neck-length and the locks shone like a harvest moon. She had high, sharp cheekbones and almost Asian, almond-shaped eyes of darkest brown. Her skin was darker than Ray's—double espresso to his skinny latte—but as smooth and fine as satin. Her nose was ever so slightly too large for her delicate face, but it didn't detract from her beauty. On the contrary: along with those almond eyes it lent her a slightly unusual, even mysterious cast. Her hands and long, slender fingers that clutched the water bowl, looked strong and capable. And there was something in her stance and bearing: the straightness of her back, the jut of her round chin, and the confidence of her pose that oozed strength.

A gold wedding band adorned the third finger of her left hand.

"Adelaide," Ray said and smiled. "Of course. I am sorry."

"No matter," she said, and put the bowl of water down on the nightstand next to Ray. She carefully picked up the broken clock and placed it inside the drawer. She turned to look at her boy, who was still standing behind the chair, rocking back and forth from leg to leg. "Did I just tell you to go outside and play? Do I have to tell you again?"

"Don't want to go play," Lucas protested.

"Don't want to play? Well, I sure can think of lots of other things for you to do then. That grass still hasn't been raked now, has it? And something has got to be done about all that rubbish. Oh, and that bedroom of yours still hasn't been tidied last I looked. Less'n elves come in the night and did it for you. There been elves in the night come to this house?"

"No, ma'am," the boy muttered.

"And that doesn't even take into account those dishes you said you would wash up for me. That was after lunch, hmm, how many hours ago? And, oh yeah, then there's the..."

"I'm going to go out and play," Lucas announced. "I'm going to go outside right now."

"You do that then, little mister."

Lucas dawdled for a moment, his eyes locked on Ray. He twisted and turned, clutching the chair back with both hands, as if being buffeted by a swift breeze. Then all at once he dashed out of the room. Ray could hear his footsteps echoing through the house, followed by the slam of a door.

"Boys!" Adelaide exhaled.

"Wouldn't have no men without them," Ray offered.

"That a promise or a threat?" Adelaide asked. She then smiled. Somewhere—possibly only in his head, or maybe his heart—Ray heard glass shatter. "How are you feeling now, anyway? How's that head of yours?"

Ray tried to raise himself onto his elbows again and winced as he got his head up off the pillow. He did, at least, manage not to collapse onto his back this time, though he blew a heavy breath out through his lips and grimaced.

"That's an answer, though it's not a very good one," Adelaide said. "You said outside on the street that your name is Ray. That still sound right?"

Ray nodded painfully. "Ray Ellison."

"That's what you said. You any relation to Mordechai Ellison and Latisha? You part of their big clan that live over near Juniper Street? I'm like third cousins twice removed from Latisha. Not that I ever see her."

"No. Not that I know of, anyway."

"No matter. Tell me about that headache. Where does it hurt?"

"Where doesn't it hurt, you mean. I feel like I just went the distance with Lennox Lewis," Ray said. "Or maybe it was just a knockout in the first round and everything else is some nasty-ass dream and I'm still lying on the canvas."

"Lennox who?"

Ray groaned as he pulled himself up and propped a pillow behind him against the headboard. Tuckered out, he fell back against the pillow.

"I guess you're not much of a boxing fan, huh?" Ray asked.

"My husband used to love to watch the fights on the TV. I jumped all around the room with him when that Cassius Clay, I mean Muhammad Ali, knocked mean old Sonny Liston out. We were listening to that one on the radio and wasn't that a fight? But they've gone and taken all that away from him now, haven't they? I know what he did. wasn't right, but who can say what is right in these funny times. I sure don't know any more." She gave a little glance up at the painting of Jesus on the wall. "Don't know for sure about anything any more. Anyway, I don't really have time for that kind of foolishness these days. The fights, I mean."

"What?" Ray asked, entirely confused.

"Looking after Lucas takes up most of my time. What I got left after working, at least. You know how that goes. Like you said: boys turn into men. And it happens so fast."

The wooziness took hold of Ray again, and he clutched at the sides of the bed to hold onto his balance.

"Are you all right?" Adelaide asked.

"I, uhhh..." Ray had to swallow again to keep his gorge down. He took a few deep breaths and the worst of the dizziness passed again. "I certainly do appreciate you taking me in like this, I mean, a stranger and all. Not many folks would do that. At least none I can think of."

Adelaide offered a slight smile and a shrug.

"But maybe I should go to a hospital," Ray suggested.

"Colored hospital's too far away to take you this time of day."

"I'm sorry?" Ray said.

"Colored hospital. It's clear across town and it's too late in the day. I don't think you're up for the bus trip right now. I haven't got a car. If you aren't feeling better tomorrow we can find a way to get you over there. But I feel pretty sure that you've just got a mild concussion. You mostly need rest. I am a nurse, you know."

"The colored hospital?" Ray asked.

"Of course."

"What color is it?"

"Don't you sass me, mister. You think you're just going to waltz into Memphis General and get looked at today? Who do you think you are, Sidney Poitier?"

Ray was dumbstruck. Maybe it was the aftereffects of the concussion, but he couldn't seem to make words form properly in his mouth. That boy, Lucas, telling him it was 1968. This beautiful woman going on about a colored-only hospital. Using a word like colored! There may not be a television around, but just how sheltered an existence could these people live?

Adelaide dipped the washcloth into the bowl of water and wrung it out. She reached over and pressed the cool cloth against Ray's forehead. It felt nice. Real nice, as did the gentle touch of her fingers against the side of his head and his cheek. He closed his eyes and started to relax into the comfort of it, but his brain wouldn't stop racing. Against his better judgment (and desire) he pushed Adelaide's hand away.

"Doesn't it feel nice?" she asked.

"No. I mean yeah, it does, it feels lovely. But that's not the point. Look, something very weird is going on here. I don't understand it,

but this all just ain't right. I mean, I don't know what your trip is exactly, but I am not supposed to be here."

A hurt look crossed Adelaide's delicate features. It was quickly followed by a tiny inferno of anger flaring up in her eyes.

"Listen, Mister Ray Ellison. I know my house may not be the fanciest or most luxurious joint in town, but—"

"No, no," Ray said, holding up his hand. Another cloud of fuzziness took hold of his vision. He shook it off as best he could. "I'm not talking about your house. It's... I'm sure it's a beautiful house. You're a beautiful woman. But there is something seriously crazy happening here and I just don't understand what is going on."

Some of the fire melted out of Adelaide's eyes. A look of greater concern—was this man more seriously injured than she thought?—spread across her face. "I don't think I'm following you, Ray. You're just not making sense."

Ray gathered up his energy as best he could. He pulled himself higher against the headboard and took a deep breath.

"Listen Adelaide. This talk of colored hospitals and Cassius Clay and 1968—"

"It is 1968, Ray. How could it possibly be anything different? Today is April the second, 1968."

"Yeah, right. April the first, maybe. But I ain't playing the April fool."

"You're not a fool of any kind, Ray, and no one is trying to put something over on you. Listen to me clearly now. You *were* hit by a car just a few hours ago. And you've suffered an injury to your head. I'm starting to think now that the injury is worse than I guessed. And that maybe—"

Ray shook his head. "No, that can't be it. That does not explain it."

"Ray," Adelaide began, shaking her head, suddenly looking nervous.

"Listen to me, please," Ray said. His voice was cracking in spite of himself. "I am not crazy and I am not hallucinating. But it is not... it cannot be 1968. Some things are just impossible. I... wait, I know. Where's my jacket?"

Adelaide pointed at the old wardrobe in the corner of the room.

"Could you... Would you look in the inside breast pocket for me? My wallet is in there. It's proof. I just got my new MasterCard last week. It doesn't expire until 2007. It says so right on it. And all my other cards, they've all got dates on them, too. Hell, the money! That's dated too, isn't it? When it was printed. The new bills and all! That'll prove it."

Adelaide took a long look at Ray with sad eyes. She took a deep breath, let out a little sigh and offered the slightest possible shake of her head. Then she went over to the wardrobe and carefully removed Ray's leather jacket from a hanger. She carried it over to his bed and laid it down next to him. Ray grabbed at the coat and thrust his hand into the pocket.

"What the...?" he muttered.

He turned the jacket inside out and again. searched the obviously empty pocket. He flipped it around and reached inside the two outside pockets, but came up with nothing more than a dirty tissue.

"It's not here," he said. "Where the hell's my wallet?"

"Maybe you lost it when you got hit. You did go flying."

"No, no way. It—"

Then Ray remembered. He had been in Doctor Tate's office. In spite of everything—the deadly diagnosis—he had stopped off at the receptionist's desk on his way out. Not knowing his situation, she had innocently asked to see his insurance plan card again for the number. He had been in a daze at the time, what with being dead man and all, and had taken out his wallet to look for it. He kept a stack of cards in one of the little pockets and had pulled them all out to look for the one the receptionist needed. Funny how he could remember it in such detail now, despite the fog he had been in at the time. He recalled putting the wallet down on the corner of her desk. Right behind the flat panel computer monitor where she would never even have noticed it. He gave her the card, and walked out with the others still in his hand. He had forgotten his wallet entirely. It was probably still there behind that monitor.

"Doctor Tate," Ray whispered, staring off into space as if he could see that wallet out there. Reach out and pull it in from the ether.

"Who's that?"

"Doctor Tate. I left it in my doctor's office. My wallet. When I walked out."

"Well, there you go," said Adelaide with a smile. "Mystery solved."

Ray glanced back at Adelaide. "Not by half, lady. Not by half of a half of a half."

Adelaide's smile faded. She picked up Ray's coat and neatly shook it out, then hung it back up in the wardrobe. She collected the damp towels and draped them back over her arm and picked up the bowl of water.

"You get some more rest now. Supper will be ready in about an hour. You try and eat something, I reckon you'll feel tons better. Just close your eyes till then and have a nap. You've had yourself quite a shock today."

She had just slipped out of sight when Ray called out her name. Adelaide stuck her head back around the doorjamb.

"You ain't running some kind of scam on me, are you?" Ray asked.

"What do you mean?" Adelaide said, a little bit angry.

"Or playing some crazy mind game. Or a stalker! Are you a stalker?"

"A what?" she asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Like in that Stephen King movie. Whatchamacallit. *Misery*. You know the one about that writer dude who was in car accident and the crazy nurse who takes him prisoner and busts up his foot with a mallet. Of course, the writer was a famous guy and the nurse was his number one fan. Why would you be my number one fan? Why would anyone?"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Ray," Adelaide said. "Stephen King? Is he some new actor I should know about? Is this a new picture?"

"No, he's..." Ray felt the return of something that grew cold in the middle of his stomach. "You don't know who Stephen King is?"

Adelaide offered a shy smile and shrugged her shoulders.

"The writer Stephen King. He's sold like a billion books. Every damn one of them made into a terrible movie. Except *Misery*, which is a good one. James Caan plays the writer and Kathy Bates is the crazy nurse."

"No crazy nurses here," Adelaide said. "At least, no crazier than anybody else trying to raise a ten year-old boy on her own and hold down a job. And I don't have a lot of time for reading these days."

Ray nodded, but the coldness was still in his belly.

"I do love the pictures, though. I'll look out for that '*Misery*', was it called? James Caan. I know who that is! I saw him last year in, uh... that last John Wayne picture I took Lucas to see. *El Dorado*. That was it. I always love a western. My... Lucas's father loved them, too. Yeah, he is a cute-looking white boy, that Caan. I'll keep an eye out for that new *Misery*."

Ray barely registered the fact that Adelaide had walked out and turned the light off as she went. She left the door open, though, so Ray stared blankly at nothing particular in the half-dark. He heard the clatter of pots of pans and the sound of a radio being turned on in the kitchen. Ray recognized the opening bars of a real golden oldie: "La-La Means I Love You" by the Delfonics. He couldn't remember the last time he heard it.

Adelaide was singing happily along to the tune. She knew every goddamn word.

FOUR

"That's my Daddy's."

Ray had just walked out of the bathroom and was still cinching the belt of the green flannel bathrobe. Adelaide had knocked on the bedroom door just a few minutes before and asked if he wanted his dinner in bed. Ray was feeling so indebted to her already and so embarrassed about his confusion and helplessness—and the whole damn insane situation—that he insisted that he would try to get up and eat at the table with them. She had given him a most approving nod and smile in reply.

And a little wink.

Ray desperately needed a whiz and a wash. He slowly, slowly slid his legs over the edge of the bed and ascended to a sitting position. For a moment the walls started to bend and bow, and the floor dropped away into some bottomless pit beneath him. But Ray closed his eyes, took a deep breath and the usual aspects of three-dimensional space returned. Then his knees buckled the first time he tried to find his feet and he fell back onto the bed with a dull thud.

"Everything all right in there?" he heard a concerned voice call.

"Okay. Fine," he croaked. He cleared his throat and called out again slightly more convincingly: "Yeah!"

"All right, then," Adelaide called back.

Ray's second attempt at achieving verticality resulted in equal disappointment and embarrassment, but a third time proved the charm. Once upright, Ray decided that he was in no particular rush to get anywhere today. Indeed, he reckoned that making it to the bathroom would be more than enough. So employing every due care, he took a baby-step towards the door. Miraculously, his head was still five feet eleven inches above his feet, exactly where it always had and should have been. Feeling almost absurdly proud of himself, Ray took a second step, then a third. Hell, walking wasn't so hard. He could do this with his eyes closed.

He tripped on the edge of the rug.

"Ray?" Adelaide inquired, a little more concerned.

"I'm all right, I'm fine," he yelled. He'd fortunately managed to catch hold of the doorknob and avoid the total ignominy of having to scrape himself off the floor. Or be scraped. "Just working my way through some issues," he muttered.

Employing the kind of care normally reserved for the extreme elderly and frail, or those transporting truckloads of nitro-glycerine through mountain passes, Ray inched his way out of the bedroom. Thanks to whatever gods there be, the bathroom was the next door down the hall. Like the tiny room he had awakened in, it was small and spartan, but hospital spic-and-span. Every porcelain surface shone, the faucets glistened so much that he could have used them to watch himself shave, and he reckoned that not even the fussiest of pooches would hesitate to drink out of the toilet bowl. But then Adelaide was a nurse after all.

Ray relieved himself with enormous relief, flushed and then filled the sink basin with cold water. He rolled up his sleeves and plunged his arms in up to the elbow. Still taking no small amount of care, he hunched over the sink and splashed water over his face and down the top of his head. He felt it running down his back, wetting his shirt, but it just felt too damn good to stop. He dried himself as best he could with a thin cotton hand towel that lay folded on the counter beside the basin. The towel was monogrammed in script with the word "Guest." He glanced at the towel rack, and saw another towel monogrammed "Hers."

Not a "His" in sight.

Ray's mouth felt like the abandoned site of a traveling carnival. Two toothbrushes—one big, one small—rested in a cup above the sink. He shook his head. He found a tube of toothpaste and squeezed out a fat line on his finger. He rubbed the finger around his teeth as best he could, grinding the toothpaste in with his molars, then rinsed and spat. He was about to use the towel to clean the wet mess he'd made on the counter top when the tube of toothpaste caught his eye again. It was almost all used up and a brand he didn't know; the truth was it looked like some extreme bargain brand. He was struck by an idea, though.

He carefully unfurled the tube to get a look at the crimp: that's where the expiration date would be stamped.

There was nothing there.

Ray Ellison was as curious as the next man, but the one thing he'd never been was a snoop. He knew people who were medicine chest pokers and he hated their type. He felt and understood the temptation to root around through someone else's things, in someone else's life—who didn't?—but in those few instances in which he'd given in to the temptation and played the snoop, he'd hardly ever discovered anything all that interesting. And never anything that was worth how rotten it made him feel to know he'd been doing something that just wasn't right.

But today was different. Today he wasn't snooping for the sake of snooping, for finding out some little morsel of awfulness about someone else which might serve to make him feel better about himself. Which is to say, the standard snooper's modus operandi. No, when Ray opened the door of Adelaide's neat little medicine chest he was a man with a righteous mission; it was a genuine quest for knowledge.

There wasn't much on the shelves, it had to be said, but Ray studied every box, jar and bottle in that medicine cabinet for expiration dates.

Nothing. nada. el blanco grande.

Not a single item was stamped with an expiration date. Not even the Bayer aspirin bottle.

"But there's always a date. There's got to be," Ray whispered to himself. Then he looked up at himself in the mirror. "When did it start?" he asked the tired man he saw there.

Ray didn't know. He tried to think back over the years. When had products first started to be marked with expiration dates and such? He couldn't remember them as a kid, but then what kid would pay attention to such things? He knew that everything was stamped in these consumer-aware days. Who'd buy a prepared meal or a quart of milk or a blueberry muffin if there was no date on it? Just to be safe, of course.

Did they have those things in 1968, Ray found himself thinking?

"Oh, man, you are going stark raving crazy," Ray told himself in the mirror. "Your little trolley of rationality and good sense has skipped the tracks and landed in a ditch. There were no survivors."

He started to close the medicine cabinet and then he thought better of it.

The products of course. The things themselves. The bottle of aspirin, the box of Band-Aids, the jar of petroleum jelly, the tube of menthol rub.

The packaging was all ancient; the designs, images and typefaces used on the products archaic.

But every single item was practically brand new. The boxes weren't moistened and yellowed and torn from decades spent sitting in an old medicine chest. Ray pulled a Band-Aid out of the box and ripped off the backing.

The adhesive on it was good as new. They might well have been bought yesterday.

He looked again at the bottle of aspirin. Definitely no expiration date stamped anywhere, but there was a copyright date in tiny letters at the bottom of the clean label.

The information about the aspirin had been copyrighted by Bayer Laboratories in 1965.

Ray guessed that aspirin was the kind of product that didn't change too much, but he knew that packaging and labels certainly did. Surely the Bayer aspirin company wasn't using the same labels they used in 1965? But that could only mean...

No. It was impossible. Utterly, totally, one hundred and ten per cent impossible.

Wasn't it?

Ray's shirt was too wet to wear. He peeled it off and patted his back and chest dry with the towel. He saw the old flannel robe hanging on a hook on the back of the door and put it on without really thinking. He took a final look at himself in the bathroom mirror, and shook his head at the woeful sight of himself till it started to hurt again. Then he walked out down the hall and into the sitting room.

"That's my Daddy's," Lucas repeated when he saw Ra emerge from the bathroom.

"What's that?" Ray said.

"That's my Daddy's bathrobe. You got it on."

Ray patted himself on the chest, like a shoplifter caught red-handed by the store security guard. Who me? What robe? He didn't know what to say to the boy.

"It's all right, Lucas," Adelaide said, coming out of the kitchen for a look. "Ray can wear it for now. It won't do anyone any harm."

"I'm really sorry," Ray stammered. "I just saw it hanging there and I got my shirt all wet when I was washing and..."

"It's no matter at all," Adelaide said. She looked infinitely sad as her eyes raked up and down over the slightly tatty green flannel. Ray didn't think she was seeing him at all. "You go ahead and wear it."

Adelaide went back into the kitchen. Lucas still looked at Ray with a hint of suspicion. He, too, appeared to be looking at the robe rather than the man inside of it. Ray felt like a complete jackass for not even thinking about whose robe it had to be and what it might mean to Lucas and Adelaide.

"It's been hanging on the door for a long time," Lucas said. "Ever since..."

No need, really, for him to complete the thought. Ray understood precisely why it had been left there. He was again lost for words. But Lucas came to his rescue.

"It's all right for you to wear," Lucas said, having clearly thought about it and come to some manner of decision. He nodded to himself and echoed his mother. "It's no matter at all."

Ray relaxed slightly, pulling the belt a little bit tighter. "So, uh, you been doing some good playing?"

Ray had never exactly been a natural with the kids.

Lucas just shrugged.

"What's your favorite video game?" Ray asked.

"Huh?" Lucas said, screwing up his face.

"I bought a PlayStation ages ago, but I never really use it. I just use it for DVDs. You look like a Gameboy man to me, though. Am I right?"

"What's a Gameboy?" Lucas asked.

"What's a...."

That searing cold took hold in Ray's belly again. Surely, however low paid—and working as a nurse, Adelaide couldn't have been that desperately poverty-stricken? There wasn't a ten year-old boy in the land, on the planet, probably, who didn't know what a Gameboy was. Even if he didn't have one, he must at least want one with that desperate want that only kids can feel.

Well, maybe not just kids.

For the first time, Ray took a good look all around the small living room. There was an old, red sofa with lace doilies and antimacassars around the pillows and arms. Across from it sat a comfortable looking easy chair, with the impression of a shapely rear still visible in the plump cushion. He saw a pine coffee table with some coasters on it and a vase with some pink plastic flowers. No TV, big or small, no video or DVD player. No electronics of any kind, in fact, unless you cared to count an old wooden standing lamp that could have dated from any time in the past seventy-five years. The furnishings were all old, but they could have been just that. Old. It didn't necessarily mean anything. It didn't mean...

Just stop those crazy old thoughts right this second, Ray told himself.

Adelaide poked her head into the room again. She said: "You two men come and sit down now. I've got some supper on the table for everybody."

There was no dining room, merely a round dining table just big enough for three in the corner of the kitchen. Ray glanced around at the ancient white refrigerator, which hummed like a small motorboat. He couldn't remember when he'd last seen one like it, with the big silver handle that you pulled down to open the door and the big metal tray on the bottom to collect the run-off water. His grandmother had once owned a similar one, but she died back in 1974. The stove was of a similar vintage, as was the kitchen decor. Two tiny, floral prints hung on the wall above the dining table, and there was a "Bless This House" sampler that would have been too

kitsch for words if it hadn't been so sweet. It had to have been homemade.

As in the rest of the house, there was a shocking paucity of electronics: no microwave, no cappuccino machine—though a big, black kettle sat atop one of the heating rings on the stove—no electric can opener or bread maker or anything, really.

There was however a kitchen radio on a corner of the counter top. It was a big old Bakelite job, that looked like it had tubes inside. Ray squinted at the dial and saw that it was AM only. It would probably be worth a few bucks auctioned off on eBay. Adelaide saw him looking and misunderstood his interest.

"Would you like to have some music on with supper?" she asked.

"Huh?" Ray said, his reverie broken. "Yeah, that would be really nice."

Adelaide stood up and turned the radio on. It took about thirty seconds for the sound to fade in. "People Got to be Free" by the Rascals was the song that came on.

"Huh!" Ray snorted.

Adelaide smiled, misinterpreting again. "I like this, too," she said. "They're playing it a lot at the moment."

"Can't remember the last time I heard it," Ray said, shaking his head.

"Oh, they play it all the time. I think it was number one last week. Or was it the week before? Adelaide smiled. "I always listen to the chart show," she explained.

Before Ray could formulate an intelligible response, Adelaide began serving out the food. She sliced him off a big hunk of meatloaf and ladled out a king's ransom in mashed potatoes. She gave lesser helpings to Lucas and herself then offered Ray the gravy. He liberally poured it over the top of everything and, in spite of himself and his confusion and pain, tore into the meal like a man with a mission.

It was the best damn meatloaf Ray Ellison had eaten in his entire life. Adelaide Tyler sure could cook.

His plate was clean before he even spoke another word. Lucas and Adelaide exchanged a series of glances and Lucas started to giggle,

but Adelaide shushed him with a gesture. They had barely taken three bites of their dinners.

"Would you care for some more?" she asked.

"Mmm, yeah," Ray said. Adelaide obliged with another doorstop slab of meatloaf and a second mountain of potatoes. A brown cascade of gravy oozed down over it like lava.

Ray was almost through the second helping when a semblance of self-awareness finally set in. He looked up and saw mother and son watching him with no small amount of amusement in their eyes and most of their meatloaf still on their plates.

"Oh. Sorry," Ray said.

"No need to apologize here," Adelaide said. "I do like to see a man who enjoys his food. Um-hmm."

"I like it, too," Lucas declared. And he set to polishing off his dinner in manic, Ray Ellison style.

Adelaide laughed. Ray couldn't help but join her.

Ray declined a third helping though he could have eaten another slice of meatloaf, as he was just too damned embarrassed to ask for more. He did, however, happily sign-up for a wedge of Adelaide's homemade cherry pie. The three of them downed the dinner and dessert with gusto and pleasure, but little conversation. Still, it was a surprisingly comfortable dinner for one and all as the ancient radio papered over the silence—"Stone Cold Picnic," "Midnight Confessions," "Mighty Quinn."

True golden oldies. Or were they?

"That just might be the single best meal I've ever eaten," Ray announced after surrendering to the inevitability of fate and accepting a second piece of cherry pie. "Dance to the Music" by Sly & the Family Stone was the song of the moment.

"I doubt that," Adelaide said. "It's just meatloaf and potatoes. Doesn't get much simpler."

"And pie," Lucas chipped in.

"No chance of forgetting that pie," Ray said, nodding.

"I'm just pleased to see that you have such an appetite," Adelaide said. "You sure do eat like a healthy man. I think you'll be back to one

hundred per cent in another day or two. Yes, indeed, you'll be fine and back to normal."

As she said the words, the warmth and pleasure of the meal faded away. They were replaced by the cold feeling inside that Ray had been trying so hard to dismiss. He took another look around the kitchen, and eyed up the old AM radio blaring its endless stream of golden oldies. Everything about the unreality of his situation came flooding back into his head.

"I don't know about normal," Ray said. "Normal most definitely is not what I am feeling right now."

"Is your head still hurting?" Adelaide asked. "Do you still feel dizzy?"

"A little bit, yeah. And even after all that wonderful food, I've still got a bolt of pain running from temple to temple. Do you have any Tylenol?"

Adelaide narrowed her eyes at him. "Any what?"

Ray massaged his temples with his fingertips. "Tylenol. Or Advil or something. I saw some aspirin in the bathroom but aspirin sometimes upsets my...."

He glanced up at Adelaide, who clearly didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about. And she was a nurse.

When was Tylenol invented, Ray asked himself? Or Advil? It had to be way after 1968. Even when he was a kid, he'd always had baby aspirin.

"Oh, man," he muttered.

"Should I get you some aspirin?" Adelaide asked.

"No, it's all right. I'll be okay."

"You suddenly don't look so okay. Maybe you want to go back and lie down for a little while. Maybe a big meal was a little too much, too soon."

"No, I'll be okay here. Just let me finish my coffee. Maybe drown my troubles in another piece of that cherry pie."

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Adelaide." Ray took a slug of coffee and forced a smile. "My head isn't so bad. It's more all this craziness about it being 196—"

"Time for your bath, young man," Adelaide practically shouted. She shot Ray a look that clearly told him to drop that particular topic of conversation. He paid heed.

"Oh, Mama! I want to talk some more to Ray. I want to—"

"Don't you argue with me, little mister."

"Oh, M-a-a-a."

Adelaide offered Lucas a look very similar to the one she'd flashed at Ray. Ray guessed that not a lot of patients in Adelaide's hospital argued with her when she glowered at them with that look. Lucas sure didn't.

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

"I'm going to go fill the tub. You can clear the table in the meanwhile. Let Ray here sit and rest. You hear? You clear the dishes."

"Yes, ma'am," Lucas dutifully repeated.

Lucas made a desultory effort at collecting the cutlery as his mother walked out of the room. He stopped as soon as he could hear the sound of the bath taps start to run and sat back down in the chair next to Ray. He glanced over his shoulder just to make sure that his mother hadn't snuck back down the hall to check up on him. Then he scooped up some stray bits of pie from the bottom of the tin. He glanced up at Ray before actually depositing the crusty morsels in his mouth.

"Go for it, my man," Ray said with a laugh. "I won't tell."

Lucas wolfed it down then laughed along with Ray. Without saying anything, they both appreciated it as a really nice moment to share. Ray decided he'd better serious things up in case Adelaide did suddenly reappear. He cleared his throat and shoved his own plate further away.

"Your mama is a very nice lady, Lucas."

"Pretty, too," Lucas said, shooting Ray another awfully knowing look for a ten year-old.

Ray just nodded. With Adelaide out of the room, Ray really wanted to question Lucas about a lot of things—1968 being just the start. But he felt uncomfortable raising the subject. Adelaide obviously didn't want him talking about it in front of the boy and he felt he couldn't

betray the incredible trust she had shown in him. He didn't know what to say.

"Usually my Mama's even nicer than she is now," Lucas told him.

"What do you mean?" Ray asked. "Taking a sick stranger into her house. Feeding him a feast, making him well. I never knew anyone would do anything like that. I don't know how much nicer you can get than your mama's been to me."

"I suppose," Lucas said. He snatched another pastry crumb from the pie tin. "Just that she's real upset and all."

"About me?" Ray asked.

"Huh? No. I mean, I don't think so. She likes you. I can tell."

Lucas gave him another one of those looks. Was the kid auditioning for the role of Yenta the Matchmaker in the traveling cast of *Fiddler on the Roof*? Ray was pretty sure that show predated 1968.

"Well, I like her too," Ray said, as nonchalantly as he could. "And I like you, Lucas."

Lucas shifted uncomfortably in his chair and played with a dirty fork.

"So what's your mama so upset about?"

"She got another one of them letters today in the mail today. Mailman brought it special. She had to sign for it and everything. Mailman apologized for bringing it."

"What kind of letter?" Ray asked.

Lucas studiously studied the dirty tablecloth. He clearly wanted to tell Ray about it, but wasn't sure if he should. Ray was sure that he probably shouldn't, but now he wanted to know what it was all about. He reached out and gently lifted Lucas's chin with one finger.

"What kind of letter did she get?" he asked again.

"It's about the house."

"What about the house?" Ray asked, keeping his tone even to hide his impatience. He wasn't used to talking to kids (unless you counted a few of the junior partners at the law firm).

"Some people, they want to take our house away 'cause of the money. They keep threatening to kick us out. Say they're gonna... invict us."

"Evict," Ray corrected

"Yeah, evict. Mama keeps calling the man at the Legal Aid who's supposed to be helping us, but they just say they too busy and we ain't important enough. They got too much other work to do, they say."

"Why do they want to evict you, Lucas? Who are these people?"

Lucas just shrugged, clearly very uncomfortable.

"Is it the bank? Is that who sent the letter?" Ray asked.

"I think so. Yeah, the bank."

Ray looked around again at the neat little house. Minimal and spartan as it was, Adelaide Tyler's house felt as warm and homey as any place he'd ever been. Adelaide and Lucas seemed so happy here, even without DVDs and Gameboys and a broadband-connected fridge. It all just felt so happy, so... safe.

Ray had an idea.

"Lucas?" he said.

"Yeah?"

Ray got up and walked to the door. He glanced down the hall. The sound of running water still spilled out of the bathroom. He walked back over to the table and leaned conspiratorially toward Lucas.

"Do you know where that letter from the bank is now?"

Lucas looked up at Ray with big questions in his eyes. Ray smiled and nodded encouragingly at him. The boy hesitated for only an instant, then got up and ran out of the kitchen. He came back with an envelope in his hands and passed it on to Ray. The return address reported that it was from the First National Bank of Memphis.

Ray heard Adelaide's footsteps coming down the hall. He shoved the envelope into the pocket of the bathrobe and quickly sat back down. He put one finger to his lips and shook his head at Lucas. The boy nodded his understanding in reply, just as Adelaide stuck her head through the door.

"Bath time, young man. And I do mean now."

Lucas dashed off behind his mother.

Ray sat down and read the letter.

Ray was dreaming again.

He had enormous, naked feet. They were joke shop novelty feet, if such things existed, with toes the size of kielbasa sausages and hobbit-hairy knuckles. The odd thing was that the rest of him was normal—even his legs, so walking around on those feet was something of an effort. He waddled across a big field of wet, purple grass that squished between his giant toes with every passing step. Up in the yellow sky, giant Dali-esque clocks floated where clouds should be, their razor sharp hands spinning backwards comically. Ray looked down again and saw that the grass beneath him had transformed into a gooey black liquid, like tar, and his immense feet were stuck in it up to his ankles. He tried to lift the right and then the left one out, but he only sank further into the thick, inky pool like a doomed dinosaur left to contemplate its impending death in a swamp. The yellow sky turned dark and the clocks began to crash to the ground around him, dropping out of the sky like clay pigeons, and exploding silently into flames as they alighted. The explosions set the tar on fire and soon the flames and heat were all around him. Still, he couldn't lift his feet as the smell of burning tar filled his nostrils. The heat grew more intense and he felt the hairs in his nose begin to singe as sweat poured out of him. His clothes burst into flames and Ray knew he was about to be incinerated. He could now smell his own burning flesh. Panic welled up inside and he wanted to scream, but he could no more form words than he could lift those immense feet from the burning pit of tar.

"Hey, hey," a gentle voice called out.

A soft, cool touch on the back of his hand chilled the heat of the flames.

Ray opened his eyes.

Adelaide was crouching beside him. Her finger lingered against the back of his hand, honest concern filling her eyes.

"Are you okay, Ray?" she asked.

Ray swallowed hard and sat up. He had fallen asleep on the sofa, his head no more than an inch from the blazing radiator. That explained the heat in his dream. He had to move his hand to pull

himself to a sitting position, instantly regretting the loss of Adelaide's touch on his hot skin.

"Uh-huh," he said, not very convincingly. He still felt halfway in dreamland. He quickly looked down at his feet. They were the normal size. He let out a big sigh and added: "Hundred and ten per cent."

Adelaide got off her haunches and sat back in the easy chair across from the sofa. She was wearing an old terrycloth robe that was designed for comfort and was never meant to be flattering, but somehow it worked for her anyway. She smiled at Ray and cinched the belt a little tighter.

"You were breathing real hard and moaning a little bit," she said. "Were you having a bad dream?"

"Yeah," he said, feeling the flames. Then for some reason he lied. "Can't even remember it now."

"It's like that sometimes. Lucas has lots of nightmares. Kids do, I suppose."

She didn't elaborate and Ray didn't feel entitled to ask. Not yet, anyway.

"So how are you feeling?" Adelaide asked. "You really should be in bed, you know. You need the sleep after what you been through today."

"I feel like I've been asleep all day."

"The body knows what it needs," Adelaide said. "That's one thing I learned from being a nurse all these years. All the medicine and testing and expert know-how, is only good for so much. But when push comes to shove, you ask the patient what they need and more often than not they know best. Sometimes the body is its own best healer. Drug companies don't care for that idea, of course."

Ray thought about the tumor in his head. Somehow, in the madness of the day, he'd practically forgotten about it. Imagine that. When Doctor Tate had laid out his deadly diagnosis, Ray thought he'd never be able to think of anything else for the rest of his life except the deadly tumor that was killing him day by day. And here he'd not thought about it once for hours. He had forgotten completely about it. Then a funny thought struck him.

Is the tumor still there? What if this really 1968? That tumor didn't grow until 2003. Maybe it's not there anymore. Or rather, not yet. Or...

"Craaaaazy," Ray said out loud, without even realizing it.

"I don't think so," Adelaide said, a little bit offended. She thought Ray was commenting on her philosophy of the body.

Ray laughed and held up one hand. "No, not you," he said. "I meant me. I-I'm sure you're right about bodies knowing what's best for themselves. Though I don't know about this tatty old thing."

He thumped himself on the noggin.

"Is your head still aching?"

"It's not so bad now," Ray lied again.

"I'm going to get you that aspirin now. And you are going to take it."

She walked out of the room before Ray could object. He slipped his hand into the pocket of the robe and felt the letter that he'd already read through three times. He was still trying to decide what to do about it when Adelaide returned with two tablets and a glass of cool water. She watched very nurse-like as he popped them onto his tongue and swallowed them down with the drink. He opened his mouth wide to show her that he'd taken them like a good boy. They both laughed.

"Sorry," she said. "Lucas hides his pills under his tongue when I give him medicine. Some of my patients know the same trick. I always like to check."

"I don't imagine too many of them cross you," Ray said. "Or Lucas, either."

"Am I so scary?" she asked.

"No. No! That's not what I meant."

Adelaide laughed to show she'd been teasing him.

"What is it then?" she said.

Ray wasn't sure what to say. He thought about it for a minute.

"Go ahead, spit it out," Adelaide prompted. "I can take it. I work with doctors all day long, remember? I have got a skin thicker than a cantaloupe melon."

"You just seem..." Ray hesitated again. "You seem like a lady who is very sure of herself. Very... strong. Yeah."

"I don't know if that's how I care to be seen," Adelaide said. "If any woman does."

"No, it's definitely a good thing," Ray said, carefully holding her gaze. "Women need to be strong to deal with all the sh... garbage gets thrown at them. I never cared much for the wilting flower routine myself. That southern belle nonsense some white women put on. Sisters, too."

"You have some very forward thinking ideas, Mr Ellison. I think you might be a man ahead of your time."

About thirty-five years, Ray thought. But he didn't say it.

"I think you're a little ahead of your time, too," he did say. "Working full-time, raising Lucas, taking care of this fine home."

"I don't know about that," Adelaide said. "I just do what I have to do to survive, like everybody else. Some jobs you've got no choice about doing. And as for taking care of things, well, that's easier said than done."

Ray decided to go for it.

"Adelaide," he said.

She'd been glancing all around the room after his last comment. He thought he knew what she must have been thinking about. Ray spoke her name in so serious a manner, though, that she turned her attention back to him.

"You know, you never once today asked me what it is that I do. For a living, I mean."

"I'm not one to pry."

"Another highly admirable trait," Ray said. "But I am a working man. And I work for a law firm."

"You're a lawyer?"

"No. One look at my clothes should have told you I'm not. No, I work for a big law firm, but I'm just a clerk."

"That sounds like a good job," Adelaide said.

"It's all right. But the thing is, I look at documents all day. Legal documents. That's my job."

"Is it fun?"

"Hardly. Fun doesn't enter to it. And like I say, I'm not a lawyer, but I've been doing it for going on ten years now and you pick things up whether you mean to or not. You do learn a bit."

"I'm sure you do," Adelaide said.

Ray took a deep breath. He took Adelaide's letter out of his pocket and held it up to her.

"I've seen more than my share of these, for example."

A storm of fury blew across Adelaide's pretty face. She stood up and snatched at the paper in Ray's hand, but he held it out of her reach.

"Where in the world did you get that? That letter is none of your business! What do you think you're doing?"

She made another grab for the paper, but Ray switched hands, continuing the game of keepaway. He couldn't help but laugh when she tripped over the hem of her robe trying to grab it back and tumbled down onto the couch beside him.

Adelaide failed to see anything humorous in the situation.

"Just who do you think you are?" she fumed. "I pick you up off the street—literally pick you up—and take you into my house. A stranger I don't know from Adam. Out of the goodness of my heart I look after you and this is the thanks that I get? You go snooping into my private affairs? I got a mind to throw you right back out onto that street. Right this minute. You got some kind of—"

"Adelaide," Ray said, cutting her off with something in his tone. The anger still roiled in her eyes, but she held her tongue for a second. "What if I told you how you can save your house?"

Adelaide started to reply, then held back. Ray saw the calculation—no, the *evaluation* of him that was going on inside her head at that very moment. He tried to look sincere, which seemed to confuse her even more. He broke out laughing.

"What's funny?" Adelaide demanded.

"Nothing," he said. "Everything."

She shook her head, but he held up a finger.

"How about you make another pot of that spectacular coffee of yours and I'll tell you what you've got to do tomorrow. The bank is not going to touch this house. I promise you that."

Adelaide still looked unsure, but she stood up.

Ray followed her back into the kitchen, feeling remarkably good for a dying man out of his time.

FIVE

PA-DUNK! Thud-thud.

PA-DUNK! Thud-thud.

PA-DUNK! Thud-thud.

Ray opened his eyes.

PA-DUNK!

"Lucas!"

A moment of silence. Then: "Yes'm."

"What did I tell you about bouncing that ball this morning?"

Another silence. A thoughtful silence. As if the question had been: explain in full the history and theory of the phenomenon of black body radiation in ten words or less, none of which contain the letter "E."

"You told me not to," a tiny voice finally replied.

And this year's Nobel Prize for Physics goes to Lucas James Tyler!

"That's right," Adelaide said. "I told you not to. And what is it that are you doing?"

"Bouncing the ball," Lucas admitted.

"And what are you going to do now?"

Another pause for thoughtful introspection. A nervous hush goes through the crowd.

"Stop."

"Thank you very kindly," Adelaide said.

Ray slipped the green flannel robe on over his boxer shorts and T-shirt and wandered out of the bedroom, rubbing the heels of his palms into his still bleary eyes.

"Good morning," he said to Adelaide with a smile. He started, "Wowie kazowie!"

Adelaide was dressed to the nines. She wore a calf-length black skirt—and Ray couldn't help but notice those muscular calves—with a matching cinched jacket over a vivid, orange silk blouse. She had an orange and black striped silk scarf to match and a small black hat that practically screamed "1960s" pinned ever so slightly off kilter over a big curl of her long black hair. She looked every inch a hungry

tiger on the prowl and Ray couldn't decide whether being her prey would be the most or least desirable thing in the world.

"Do I look all right?" she asked, with genuine innocence.

"All right does not even begin to describe the situation," Ray said. "The vocabulary required to do full justice to how you look this morning is of an entirely different variety."

"Is that yes, then?" she smiled.

"I think you can take that as a ya—ya—ya—yes. You look absolutely sensational. Woo-woo-woo, as the audience used to shout at Arsenio."

"Who?"

"Ar... No one," Ray sighed.

"I haven't worn any of this since..." The look of otherworldly sadness briefly washed over Adelaide's face again. "I haven't worn this outfit in a long time. I didn't know if the skirt would even fit me anymore."

"Oh, it more than fits," Ray marveled, eyes now open wide. "Woman, if you could bottle that look, you could put the coffee growers of the world out of business in a day. Starbucks look out. And Beyoncé take a hike."

Adelaide shot him another of her quizzical glances, but laughed anyway, clearly flattered. There followed a surprisingly awkward moment of silence between them as Ray continued to study those calves and Adelaide pretended not to notice that he was doing it.

Lucas walked in to save the day, squeezing a pinky ball—a *spaldeen* as Ray remembered them—in one hand.

"Morning," Ray said to the boy. Lucas sort of nodded in the way that kids do when confronted by the niceties of the adult world which make not the slightest bit of sense to them, but which they know they are somehow expected to acknowledge lest they get told off for not doing so. He went over to the refrigerator, opened the door and poured himself some milk, without letting go of the spaldeen. From an old-fashioned glass milk bottle, Ray observed. The fridge held not a single plastic container of any kind.

Weird, weird, weird danced briefly through Ray's head.

"Now I expect I'm going to have to be downtown practically all of the day," Adelaide announced. She gave Lucas a stern look. "I don't want you getting into any kind of trouble while I'm out, or giving Ray here a hard time. I'm going to ask for a report when I get home."

"Yes, ma'am," Lucas sighed. He had his back to his mother and conspiratorially rolled his eyes at Ray, who had to bite his lip in order not to smile.

"You rolling those eyes at me, little man?" Adelaide asked.

Lucas whipped around, looking at his mother slack-jawed.

"You think there's anything I don't see or I don't know? I know exactly what goes on in that head of yours at all times."

"Oh, man," Lucas groaned.

Ray did laugh out loud.

"And don't you encourage him, either," she said, wagging a finger at Ray.

"No, ma'am," Ray said, straightening up.

"Now I left some lunch for you in the ice box," Adelaide told Lucas. "And I want you to eat that apple today, you hear? And don't you forget about your reading and math homework. I'm wanting to see that all done by the time I get back. You know that I'm going to look at your notebook tonight."

"I know," Lucas said.

"All right then." Adelaide took a good look around the kitchen. It was a drill sergeant's inspection performed in a glance. She nodded to herself, apparently satisfied that everything was in military-fold order. "You come and give me a kiss now."

For just a nanosecond, Ray thought—or was it hoped?—that she'd been talking to him. He swayed ever so slightly forward onto the balls of his feet before catching himself. He swallowed hard, but it didn't appear that Adelaide had noticed. Lucas made a face, but he dashed over to his mom and gave her a peck on the cheek. It pleased Ray to see that the boy wasn't too old to resist that. Yet.

"You can do better than that, little man. I need a serious good luck kiss today."

Lucas threw his arms around his mother's neck and gave her a big old smooch. She squeezed him tight. Ray smiled wide watching the

pair.

Adelaide took a compact out of her tiny black leather purse and studied her make-up one more time. With a satisfied nod, she started toward the kitchen door. She stopped and turned back to look at Ray.

"You are absolutely sure about this?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Ray said, nodding.

"They are not going to just laugh in my face when I tell them? Kick my sorry behind out the door?"

"Not a chance. I think it's fair to say that no one is going to be kicking that behind in that skirt."

She gave him a warning glance and Ray serioused-up.

"No kidding, now. You've not only got right on your side, Adelaide, you've got the law."

"That ain't always enough for folks like us," she said. "You must know that."

"All I know is that the law is the law. And that in this case it is on your side. Big time. They think you don't know the law, or won't find out. That's the kind of thing banks and big businesses rely on. But once you make it clear you know your business, they'll change their tune. Property law is pretty absolute and it won't be worth their time fighting you about it. Now, do you have that list I wrote out for you? Everything you need to say?"

She patted her pocketbook and tried on a smile, but she looked awfully nervous.

"You've got to be confident in yourself, Adelaide. Put on that look you give your patients when it's time for them to take the medicine that they don't want to take. You put on that face when you're at work because you know what's best and what's right for them. Because you're sure of yourself. Well, this is what's best for you and I'm sure of that. And I promise you that it is also what is one hundred per cent, straight up the middle, right?"

"Okay," Adelaide said and nodded. She took a deep breath and Ray saw some of that determination and grit he'd seen in her before take over her demeanor.

"Give 'em hell," Ray said.

"Here I go," she replied. And with a final wink to Lucas she was out the door.

For a little while, Ray and Lucas stared silently at the door through which Adelaide had departed. Then Lucas came over and sat down in the chair next to Ray.

"Are we really going to be able to keep our house?" he asked.

"Yes, Lucas. You're not going to have to worry about that anymore after today. I'm sure your mama is going to give them hell. Heck, I mean."

"I wasn't worried," Lucas said. "But my mama is, you know?"

"I know. Trust me on this one, though. Those assho... people at the bank won't know what hit 'em after your mama gets through them today. They will be down for the count."

"That's good," Lucas said, nodding. "That's real good."

They sat silently again for a minute. Ray looked around the kitchen, then at Lucas. He'd barely been here a day, barely knew this boy and his mother, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at home anywhere. So much like he belonged to a place. He felt like he'd been living there for years and he imagined, just for a moment, that he could stay here forever; just slip right on in to their cozy little existence, like a new piece of furniture delivered fresh from the factory.

Got a Ray Ellison here for you, lady, where do you want him?

Oh, just stick him in that spare bedroom.

Sign here, lady, he's all yours.

It was a nice fantasy. But then Ray eyed up that old Bakelite radio on the counter. Looked at that ancient refrigerator humming like a swarm of killer bees.

He didn't belong. He was out of place, out of joint, and hell-to-gone out of time.

Ray sighed.

"Hey, Lucas," he said.

"Hey what?" the boy replied. They smiled at each other.

"Do you know how to get back to the place where you and your mom found me yesterday? The street where I got hit by the car in the accident?"

Lucas thought hard for an instant then nodded. "It's not too far."

"How do I get there then?" Ray asked.

"You go out the front of the house and down to the corner with the four-way. You go down the street on the left side and just keep walking pretty much. You come right back to the street where you got hit after a while. Only takes about ten minutes to walk there."

"All right. Thanks, Lucas."

Ray didn't want to get up, but he did it anyway. Knew that he had to. He went back into the little bedroom and took off the green flannel robe. He gave it a little stroke before carefully hanging it back up on the hook in the bathroom where he had found it. He put his own clothes back on and took a long, hard look at himself in the mirror. For reasons he wouldn't have been able to articulate, he waved to himself in the mirror. Was it "Hello, Ray?" To a new life or goodbye to his past. He wasn't sure. He turned off the light and walked out of the room.

"Lucas?" he called out.

No reply. Then: *PA-DUNK! Thud-thud.*

PA-DUNK! Thud-thud.

Ray went out through the screen door. Lucas was throwing his ball up against the house again, catching it on two short hops, regular as clockwork. He stopped when he saw Ray come outside.

"Listen Lucas, I've got to go now."

"Okay," the boy said.

"The thing is," Ray continued, "you probably won't see me again. You understand?"

Lucas tilted his head slightly to one side. He looked a little hurt. "Why not?" he asked.

Ray let out a deep breath. "Because I don't... This isn't... The thing is that there's someplace else I'm really supposed to be."

Lucas thought about that for a minute. "How do you know? Maybe you're supposed to be right here."

"It is nice here, Lucas. It is definitely mighty nice."

"So why don't you stay then?"

"I wish I could. But I just don't think it's meant to be. I belong in a different place. It's... Well, things are not always as simple as they

seem. Or as you want them to be."

"Grown-ups always say stuff like that. I hate it."

"I know, Lucas. Grown-ups are like that. And it sucks." The boy's eyes went wide and Ray mentally admonished himself again for his use of language. "I mean it's what makes it so much nicer being a kid than being a grown-up. Not having to say stupid stuff like that. Or convince yourself that it's true."

Lucas nodded, though Ray didn't think he could really understand. Ray reached over and tousled his hair, gave him a wink. He started to walk away.

"Can I go with you?" Lucas called out after him.

Ray stopped, turned around and crouched down so that he and the boy could look each other eye to eye.

"I would like that, Lucas, I truly would," Ray said. "But then who would take care of your mama? There's got to be a man around to do that."

"I suppose," Lucas reluctantly agreed.

"If I don't come back, you tell your mama that I said thank you. Thank you very much for all her kindness and... just for everything. Will you promise to do that for me?"

Lucas looked sad, but he nodded agreement. As Ray started to get up, Lucas held out his hand. Ray took the boy's hand in a firm grip and the two shook like men.

Ray set off without looking back again.

Ray hadn't grown up in Memphis, but had lived in the city long enough to know his way around most of the town. As he followed Lucas's directions to "just keep walking" he took in the neighborhood around him.

He didn't recognize it at all.

Ray knew where he was on the mental map of Memphis stored in his head, but he couldn't reconcile the Memphis he knew with the sights on the streets around him. Sure, he could see a few tall buildings looming by the riverfront some blocks away, but even those

silhouettes looked wrong and out of place to him. The context for them simply wasn't the one he was familiar with. Narrow old houses bunched together like commuters on a rush-hour train lined the residential street that he walked. The neighborhood was well kept, but had that inescapable aura of poverty kept just out of sight. The front gardens were neat enough and the ubiquitous window boxes tidy, but there were a few too many overflowing garbage cans—In fact, there was garbage everywhere he looked and peeling paint house fronts and rusted out kids' toys spilling into the overdue-for-cleaning street. You could sniff a certain local pride even over the whiff of garbage—heartfelt efforts to make the best of difficult circumstances—but the limitations of those circumstances were inescapable all the same.

And, of course, all the faces were black.

Ray stopped at the next intersection and turned around in a slow circle. He studied the pedestrians in their 1960s clothes. The men in their white button down shirts with narrow black ties and black polyester trousers, and the woman all in bright skirts and dresses, wearing scarves and hats and high-heeled shoes. No one wearing sneakers. No one wearing Levis, or hip-huggers or parachute pants. Not a baseball cap in sight. Or a Nike swoosh. No DKNY or Calvin Klein or any of that horrible logo-ed crap Ray so despised.

And the cars: old Chevies and Buicks and VW bugs and those ridiculously humungous old Caddy Sedan de Villes and Lincolns. Sucking down the gas like, well, like Humvees and SUVs. Of which there wasn't one to be found.

The music that drifted out—drifted, not blared and throbbed like the hip-hop beat that pounded from CDs blaring through ultra-bass speakers—out through the open car windows, from the houses themselves, was the sound of Otis sitting on the dock of that bay, and the Beatles (all still alive and together!) calling "Hey Jude" and, Lord have mercy, O. C. Smith singing "Little Green Apples."

"It's true," Ray said out loud to himself. And he had to lean against the hood of a parked Mercury Monterey to stop himself from falling over with the acceptance of it. "It's fucking true."

And a middle-aged black man who was just strolling past gave Ray a hard-as-nails glare, because in 1968—even with war in Vietnam and body bags on the TV and riots in the streets and the summer of sex and drugs and rock and roll all set to come—people didn't casually use profanity in the street for children and old folks and passers-by to overhear. It was, after all, a different time. He passed a gas station. Hi-test was being sold for twenty-eight cents a gallon. No OPEC.

It truly was a different time.

"How can it be?" Ray asked himself. And his head started to throb and spin once more. Ray sat down on the curb and tucked his head down between his knees.

"You all right there, my brother?"

Ray looked up at a very tall, young black man wearing a dark brown suit. He had short-cropped hair and the ugliest, thickest glasses Ray had ever seen. "Welfare glasses" he remembered was what they called them when he was a kid. No one, not even the poorest of welfare recipients wore them today. That is, Ray thought, tomorrow. Or was it...

His head started to spin again.

"You need any help, brother?" the man in the brown suit asked.

"Probably," Ray told him. "I'm just not sure who to ask."

The man smiled. "Ain't that always just the way? Maybe you find some answers here."

And he handed Ray a printed flyer. He had a whole sheaf of them jammed into one of his jacket pockets. Ray took it without really thinking.

"Thanks," he muttered.

"I hope we gonna see you there. We need all the bodies we can muster. It's going to be a thing to remember," the man said and off he went.

Ray watched him go then shoved the flyer into his own pocket without even looking at it. He got up and kept on walking.

As he got nearer to the river, the neighborhood subtly changed. The cars on the street got a little bit newer, and the houses gave way

to commercial properties and office buildings. The garbage wasn't quite so overflowing.

And the faces got a lot whiter.

Ray realized that he was attracting some stares as he walked along. He couldn't figure it out at first. He wasn't the only black man on the street, not in Memphis, Tennessee, even in 1968. He touched his fingers to his nose: was he dripping snot or something? Then he glanced down to see if his fly was undone, but everything was tucked away safe and sound where it belonged. Then he realized it wasn't his fly; it was everything he was wearing.

Ray hadn't dressed for a night on the town to go see Doctor Tate, but he had put on his best leather jacket. Ray wasn't much on clothes—he couldn't afford to on his clerk's salary—but he always had a thing for a nice leather jacket. And this one had been a bargain in last year's black friday sale, reduced from a mad six hundred dollars to a merely crazy four hundred. Ray just had to have it and made it a Christmas present to himself.

It was the only Christmas present he had received.

But even if an African-American law clerk in 2004 could afford—well, almost afford—such a luxurious item of clothing, it wasn't the sort of thing a black man on the streets of Memphis in 1968 was likely to be wearing. Never mind the fact that the cut was thirty-five years ahead of its time. Ray started to feel very self-conscious.

He walked a little faster.

As he approached the intersection where the yellow Buick had struck him, Ray had to slow down again because the feeling of dizziness was starting to overwhelm him. He leaned up against a lamppost to catch his breath and steady his head. He stared across the wide avenue to the great river now visible beyond. The Mississippi, at least looked the same. It always had, Ray reckoned, and probably always would. Thank God for small mercies and eternal truths.

Ray waited for the traffic light and carefully crossed the street to get to the side where he'd been hit by the car. His memory of the accident was still hazy, and he found it hard to orient himself without the benefit of the existence of Doctor Tate's office building as a basis

for comparison. The very idea that the building, out of which he'd walked just yesterday, was no longer there set his head to spinning again. All his normal points of reference were gone. He tried not to think about it.

Ray scanned the pavement and saw a set of fairly fresh-looking skid marks just off the curb. He couldn't be absolutely certain, but he reckoned that those were likely left by the Buick as the driver jammed on the brakes before hitting Ray. He walked out into the street trying to guess at the exact spot where he'd been standing when hit. He didn't know what he was looking for, or what he expected to really happen there. Would some trans-dimensional portal suddenly open wide, bright laser light spilling out like in some cheesy science fiction film, so that he could step back through into his own place, his own time? Was there some slip or crack in reality through which he could squeeze and set everything to rights?

Or were the cracks and doors between the eras all just in his head? Was the slip in reality in fact a slip in his own mental state? Maybe he'd gone mad. Perhaps the car had hit him so hard that everything he saw—or *thought* he saw—and felt was just some-coma-induced delusion.

Then again, maybe he should just blame it on the carcinoma.

Ray shook his head. He ranged back and forth across the same stretch of street, hopping onto the sidewalk when the lights changed and the cars flowed past then back into the road again when it was safe to do so.

Nothing happened. No portals, no doors, no pretty laser lights. No nothing. Just a bunch of antique cars beeping and honking at him for getting in their way.

No answers of any kind.

"Something I can help you with?" a voice boomed from the sidewalk behind Ray.

Ray turned around and saw a very big, very white police officer standing on the curb giving him the hairy eyeball. The cop rested one hand on the knob of his billy club.

"No thanks, officer," Ray said. "I'm just..." How could he even begin to explain what he was doing? "Just looking for something I

lost here yesterday."

The light had changed again and Ray was still standing in the street. Cars began to honk around him. The policeman beckoned Ray to the sidewalk with a curled finger.

"You can't be messing around out there, causing trouble. Traffic's got to flow. Come over here now," the officer said.

Ray, who was still somewhat adrift mentally, was a little slow to respond. Another horn blared in the street.

"Y'all hear what I just said to you, boy?" the policeman boomed. "Or is there cotton in them ears?"

Ray felt the blood race through his veins. He could practically taste adrenaline in the back of his throat. He stepped up onto the curb beside the policeman.

"What did you just call me?" he asked.

"I didn't call you nothing, boy. But let's see some identification."

Ray couldn't believe his ears. He stepped up, ready to get right in the cop's face. Who did this cracker in a uniform think he was?

"This is a public street," Ray said, "and I have got every right in the world to be here. Now as for this 'boy' bullshit—"

"Uncle Ray, Uncle Ray!"

Ray turned around, taking a step away from the cop as he did so: Lucas came racing up on his bicycle, all sweaty and out of breath.

"Lucas?" Ray asked.

"Uncle Ray!" Lucas said again. "I been looking everywhere for you. You come the wrong way. Mama's been waiting for you back at the house and is she ever mad! She says we got to get going if we're going to get to Nana's house on time." Lucas glanced over at the cop as if just noticing that he was there. "Oh, hey, Officer Bryant. How are you? My mama was just saying yesterday she was wondering how Mrs Bryant was getting along. She say she hopes Mrs Bryant's feeling better now."

"Lucas," the policeman said. He took his hand, off the nightstick. "You know this man, Lucas?"

"Yes, sir. Of course I do. This is my Uncle Ray. He's Mama's brother from Chicago. He just come down to stay with us for a visit for a few days."

"That right?" the cop said. He looked Ray up and down. He clearly didn't care much for the leather jacket. "You from Chicago?"

Ray still felt furious, but he recognized the situation he was in. He nodded at the policeman.

"I couldn't quite hear you, boy," the cop said.

"Chicago," Ray hissed.

"Umm-hmm," the cop said. He looked back at Lucas. "You'd best tell your uncle that he's not in Chicago now. This is Memphis. Hear?"

"Yes, sir," Lucas replied.

The cop gave Ray the once-over once more. He nodded and started to walk away. Then he turned back to Lucas.

"And you tell your mama that Mrs Bryant is doing much better now. You tell her I said thank you to her for her kind thoughts and that I will pass her good wishes on to Mrs Bryant."

"Yes, sir, Officer Bryant," Lucas said again.

The cop gave Ray another dirty look, but didn't say anything. Ray and Lucas watched Officer Bryant walk up the sidewalk and melt back into the greater pedestrian flow. Then Ray turned to the boy.

"Thank you, Lucas," he said.

"You're welcome," Lucas smiled. Then he added: "Uncle Ray."

The two of them laughed.

"What in the world are you doing here anyway?" Ray asked.

Lucas searched the sky for an answer then rang the little bell on the handlebars of his bicycle. "I followed you," he said.

"What for?"

"I was wondering."

"Wondering what?" Ray asked.

"I was just wondering if you figured out where it is you're supposed to be," the boy said. He looked up at Ray with an expression that suggested a knowing or wisdom far beyond his years. Ray had a fleeting sensation—and he knew it was an entirely crazy thought—that Lucas somehow knew everything about him. About who he was, where he'd been, where he was supposed to be.

Crazy, Ray thought, shaking his head.

"What?" Lucas asked.

"What, what?" Ray replied.

"I mean, why did you shake your head like that? What was you saying no to?"

Ray took another hard look around the area. He studied the skid marks on the street, watched the ancient cars zipping by, the people in their out-of-date clothes and hats. There were no portals here. No magic doors or gateways through time and space to take Ray back to where he belonged.

Where do I belong, he briefly thought?

And shook his head again.

"What?" Lucas demanded again, laughing this time.

"Nah," Ray said. "I ain't figured nothing out." Then to himself as much, or more than to Lucas: "And I'll be damned if I know how I'm going to do so."

"You use a lot of bad words," Lucas chided. "You'll get in trouble."

"Yes I do," Ray said, tousling Lucas's hair again. "And trouble enough I have already got. I guess that I should be more careful."

"I don't really mind," Lucas said.

"Maybe not. But I know someone who sure as hell... sure as heck will. And that's your mama. And what's more, if your mama comes home and finds you aren't there she is going to do some grievous bodily harm to us both."

"Grievous what?"

"She will tan our behinds from here to my home town of Chicago. And back again."

They shared another laugh.

They started walking home.

They walked in silence for a while as they passed back through the fringes of the cold commercial area and back into the more familiar and comfortable residential streets of Lucas's neighborhood. Lucas pushed his bike, occasionally ringing the little bell just for the hell of it, while Ray walked along beside lost in the swampy mire of his troubled thoughts. Lucas appeared to be deep in thought, too. After a while he stopped short and turned to Ray.

"You wasn't a-scared of that cop?" Lucas said.

"No," Ray replied.

"Why not?"

Ray thought for a moment then said: "You don't need to be scared when you're in the right. Not with the law. That's what I told your mama about the house. It's true for all kinds of things, though."

"How do you know when you're in the right?" Lucas asked.

"That's not such an easy question, I guess. But it's like knowing when you're telling the truth or knowing when you're in love. It's a feeling that comes from inside and it's about... Well, if you got to explain it, you probably don't understand it."

Lucas nodded. "I think I understand. It's like... Standing up for yourself."

"I guess so," Ray said. "Or it's about standing up for what you know you believe."

"That don't always work out so well," Lucas said.

Ray picked up on the odd tone in Lucas's voice. He was about to question him on it when, glancing around at the quiet street, a sudden thought struck him.

"Hey, Lucas."

"Hey what?" Lucas said with a smile.

"Shouldn't you be in school or something? I mean this has got to be a school day."

Lucas rang his bicycle bell again. He started walking and Ray followed along.

"Lucas?" he asked.

"They sent me home yesterday. That's where me and Mama was coming from when we saw you get hit by the car. They called Mama and she had to leave work and come and get me at school."

"Why did they send you home?" Ray asked.

Lucas shrugged. Ray reached out and touched the boy on the shoulder, making him stop and turn around to look at him.

"Why, Lucas?"

"I got into a fight," the boy said.

"What about?"

"Nothing."

"I can't believe that," Ray said. "A smart kid like you wouldn't get into fights over nothing."

"You think I'm smart?" Lucas asked, softly.

"I don't think it, I know it. Any damn fool can see that. So what was it you were fighting about?"

"This boy, Bobby Wilson's his name and he eats his own boogers. He was making fun of me in the schoolyard."

"Why did he do that?"

Lucas looked down at the ground, suddenly all shy. Ray reached out and picked his chin up so that they were looking eye-to-eye again.

"Tell me the whole truth now, Lucas," he said.

"Cause of this," he said, pointing to the big dark birthmark on the side of his face. "Bobby Wilson said I was an ugly old freak. He said he seen my mama and she look fine, so it must be my daddy who's a freak and I'm a freak just like him."

"So what did you do?" Ray asked.

"I punched that Bobby Wilson in the stomach as hard as I could. And he threw up franks and beans. That's what was the hot lunch yesterday, but I never eat it. I always eat the sandwich my mama sends me with. He threw up franks and beans all over his shoes. And a little on Mrs Dalyrimple. Boy, did she ever get mad."

"I can imagine," Ray said.

"Mama's always telling me not to fight," Lucas looked down guiltily. "I been in fights before, see. But she don't understand. I try to tell her, but she just don't understand."

"You can't be a man without fighting," Ray said.

Lucas's eyes went wide and he started bouncing up and down with excitement. "You see, you see! That's just what I told her. But she don't understand like you do. She never understands."

Ray leant down and rested himself on one knee. He wanted to be exactly at Lucas's level for what he needed to tell the boy.

"The thing is, Lucas," he began, "a real man doesn't always fight with his fists."

That elicited a look of genuine puzzlement from the boy. Ray reached out and took Lucas's hands in his own. He formed them into

fists.

"Fighting with these," he said, tapping the fists, "might, *might*, mind you, change things for a little while. A few minutes, a few hours, maybe a few days. But there's always someone comes along with bigger fists and stronger arms. And when you're bigger, well, maybe that fist is holding a tire iron. Or a knife. Or a gun."

Lucas studied his closed fists, then opened up his hands and looked at the palms. He was still listening carefully to every word that Ray uttered.

"But there are other ways to fight, too. Like I told your mama, I'm not a lawyer, but I have to hang around those types and I learned a few things in the process. If you fight with this..."

Ray gently, but distinctly touched a finger to the side of Lucas's head.

"And you fight with this..."

He pressed his palm against the boy's chest, over his rapidly beating heart.

"You can change things forever. It's a harder fight and you still ain't guaranteed to win. But it's the big fight and the important one. You fight with your head and you fight with your heart, and sometimes you back it up with your fists, too, but those are the fights that can change your life."

"You done that, Ray?" the boy asked.

Ray had to look up into the sky, then down at the ground before meeting Lucas's hungry gaze again.

"Not always," he confessed. "Like I say, it isn't such an easy a thing to do. But I try to do it. Partly 'cause I'm so damn lousy with my fists. I do try."

Lucas studied him and offered a slight nod.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" Ray asked.

"I think so," Lucas said. "But I still ain't sorry I made Bobby Wilson puke up those franks and beans."

Ray had to laugh. "Fair enough," he said. "Lucas?"

"What?"

"That birthmark on your face. That is nothing to be ashamed of, you know."

"I know," the boy muttered.

"You don't sound like you mean it," Ray said.

"Other kids are always making fun of me for it. I hate it because it makes me feel... different."

"That's normal," Ray said.

"That's what Mama says, too."

"But Lucas, don't you understand? That birthmark is part of you. Part of what you are. Everybody is different in different ways. Some look different, some act different. Lots think different. What's a little old birthmark against some of the strange ways people think in this world? What's a birthmark compared to a total body jerk like Bobby Wilson? You shouldn't be ashamed of that birthmark any more than you are ashamed of your nose or your eyes or your hair. Or your name."

"I ain't 'shamed of none of that."

"Good for you," Ray told him. "When you look in the mirror, you should always look with pride. Don't let anybody else tell you what you are or what you ought to be. You always just be yourself and if you are happy in yourself then it don't matter franks and beans, what anyone else thinks. Or says."

"I guess," Lucas said.

"Say what?"

"I mean... Okay. I'll think about that," Lucas told him.

Ray nodded his acceptance of that small victory and they started walking again, but this time Lucas made Ray stop. He carefully laid his bike on the ground and stood directly in front of Ray.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Lucas said.

"I don't know," Ray said. He sensed that Lucas had something very serious to say. "Secrets can be important things. You sure I'm the one you want to be telling it to?"

Lucas seemed to consider this, and then nodded.

"What kind of secret is it?" Ray asked.

"What I want to do when I grow up."

"That doesn't sound too secret a thing," Ray said.

Ray saw Adelaide's tiger look flash across her son's face. And he knew that Lucas was not in any kind of joking mood just then.

"You got to promise not to laugh," the boy said.

"You've got my word," Ray said, as seriously as he could.

Lucas nodded again. Then he gestured for Ray to lean down. As he did so, the boy pressed his lips to Ray's ears and whispered. Ray smiled.

"You promised you wouldn't laugh," Lucas said.

"I'm not laughing, Lucas. I'm smiling because I'm happy. It's not the same thing at all."

"Why you happy?"

"I'm happy you shared that with me. Because that's a big dream, you have. And I do like a man who dreams big."

"You think that's all it is? Just a dream?"

"I didn't say that, did I? I believe..." Ray took another look around at the alien world he now found himself in; watched in amazement as a cherry red, fresh-from-showroom Ford Mustang rag top cruised past. "I believe just about anything is possible.

"If you're willing to fight for it," he added.

Lucas continued to study him.

"Are you willing to fight for it, Lucas? You willing to fight the fight to change your life how you want it to be?"

Lucas nodded his head.

"What did you say?" Ray asked.

"I am. I am willing to fight for it."

"Good for you, Lucas. Good for you."

Ray picked up the boy's bike and started to push it up the street. Lucas drifted behind for a moment, still lost in thought.

"Come on now," Ray said. "My head still hurts from yesterday. I can't risk a tanned behind to go along with it."

Lucas smiled and ran to catch up with Ray. As he came up beside the older man, he slipped his hand into Ray's and together they walked back up the street to the Tyler house.

SIX

Ray and Lucas were playing ball with Lucas's soft, pink spaldeen on the sidewalk in front of the house. The game was known as Hit the Penny and Ray couldn't recall ever having played it before. Perhaps it had gone out of fashion by the time Ray had been a ten year-old in... oh, man, about twelve year's time. Lucas was a champ at it, though, as evidenced by the fact that he was up twenty to fifteen on Ray, despite having spotted his elder an initial twelve points. The game wasn't hard, but somehow Ray could never quite seem to flip the penny off the crack in the sidewalk to score double points. Lucas, of course, did it every goddamn time.

"Game," Lucas announced, flipping old Abe Lincoln on his copper ass yet again.

"What's that make?"

"Seven in a row," Lucas laughed. "Lucky for you we ain't playing for money."

Ray didn't care to mention that without his wallet—or indeed the bank account and ATM card which wouldn't exist for another thirty-six years—that lonesome penny on the sidewalk represented one cent more than his entire worldly fortune.

"Might as well go for eight," Ray announced. "This time I go first, though."

He missed the penny by a good three inches.

"Ouch," he cried.

"How much has he taken you for so far?" a voice called.

Ray turned around and saw Adelaide coming up the street. She still had that tiger look, but the big cat appeared to have spent a rough day in the jungle. She was carrying a paper shopping bag and offered up a tired smile at the pair.

"Hey, Mama!" Lucas called. He ran over and threw his arms around his mother's waist, burying his face in her bosom.

"Hey is for horses, little man," Adelaide said good-naturedly. She returned Lucas's embrace twofold. "But it sure is good to see you, too."

Lucas broke off the hug as quickly as he had initiated it. He bounced the ball high in the air off the sidewalk and caught it behind his back in one hand with a flourish.

"I beat Ray seven games in a row. Only, it's not much of a challenge."

"You mean Ray isn't the Hit the Penny champion that your mama is?"

"He's really not very good," Lucas said softly.

"Excuse me!" Ray said. "I happen to be standing right here. And you can't say I'm not game for the challenge. You just give me a little more time and I'll turn out to be the Tiger Woods of Hit the Penny."

"Who?" Lucas and Adelaide asked at the same time.

"Tiger..." Ray felt the bottom sink out of his world. Again. "Nobody. My name is nobody and I don't know my rear end from a hole in the ground."

"Well, whoever you are and wherever your rear end might be, you are a star in my little slice of heaven," Adelaide said.

"Did it go all right, then?" Ray asked, his heart racing. "Did they give you the runaround at the bank? What did they say?"

"Runaround my great Aunt Fanny," she said. "Those sad sacks didn't know what hit 'em when I showed up."

"Did you give them hell?" Ray asked.

Adelaide winced slightly at the minor impiety, but was too excited to be really bothered about it.

"I gave them all that I was worth and then some. I memorized that sheet you wrote out for me and I recited it all for them line by line. I told them exactly what's what and where it's at. How they can't even begin to foreclose on a property that's the subject of a court order. Then I showed them that letter of contestation from the Legal Aid and the statements from the tax office verifying the probate status of the property. And, excuse my French, but I'll be d-a-m-n-e-d if that pencil-necked geek of a bank officer didn't go whiter than a snow goose when I told him that on top of their mistakes and everything else, I'd put all the money they say I owe into an escrow account in their own darn bank."

"Good for you, Adelaide. Roar, baby!" Ray cheered.

"Good for me, is right. That man started apologizing as if he'd run over a sick orphan's Christmas puppy. Would you believe the bank manager himself came out to apologize? 'Course, that was only after I used your line about a counter suit for... What is it again?"

"Malign negligence," Ray said.

"Oh, yeah. They sure knew those words. And aren't they sweet? The manager even insisted I take a free pen and calendar before he'd let me out the door."

"Does that mean we get to keep our house, Mama?" Lucas asked.

"You had better believe it, baby. There is nobody going to take this house away from us. It is ours lock, stock and barrel, however bare the bottom of that barrel might be. And we've got Ray here to thank for it."

"No, Adelaide," Ray said. "It was all you. You would have worked it out in the end if I'd been here or not. I'm sure of that. I don't think anyone could take away from you anything that's truly yours. At least, I wouldn't want to be the fool who tried to do it."

Ray and Adelaide shared a look. A long, lingering look that was only broken by Lucas's bounces of excitement.

"What's in the sack, Mama?"

"Well," she said, turning to her boy, "I was so happy coming out of that bank, that I thought we all deserved a little treat tonight. So I am going to walk through my front door, go into my own little kitchen, and cook you two the best dinner you have ever had. Meatloaf ain't nothing, believe you me. And for dessert..."

Adelaide reached into the bag and pulled out a carton of ice cream.

"Oooh, Mama," Lucas squealed. "Is that Rocky Road?"

"What else?" she asked.

"Hooray!" Lucas cheered, jumping up and down.

Adelaide looked up at Ray. "That sound good to you, too?" she asked.

"That sounds truly wonderful, Adelaide," Ray said.

She went inside singing to herself as she crossed the threshold. It brought a big smile to Ray's face just to see her so thrilled. And the smile barely faded when Ray had time to lose a dozen more games of

Hit the Penny to Lucas before she called for them to join her for supper.

Ray washed up the dinner dishes. At home—wherever that might be at this particular moment—he ate a lot of take-out. Most of the time, he didn't even bother with plates and glasses; he just ate right out of the plastic and Styrofoam containers. He could chuck them straight into the trashcan and not have to worry about doing the dishes. Ray hated doing the dishes. Most times he didn't even bother to get out real forks and knives, either. He just used the useless plastic jobs that got tossed into the take-out bag. Or when he was feeling especially lazy, he simply picked one of the fast food joints whose fare didn't require a knife or fork, such as burgers and fries, fried chicken, pizza. Chinese was really his favorite, but he'd stopped buying it because it wasn't finger-food. His local take-out place threw in disposable chopsticks, but Ray had never mastered the art of eating fried rice with them, so it was sayonara sweet and sour chicken.

Or whatever the hell the Chinese for "goodbye" was.

But tonight Ray found that he was genuinely enjoying the meticulous washing of the dinner dishes. And they were pretty damn messy, too. Adelaide had cooked an utterly fabulous dinner, assembled it quickly out of what seemed to be almost nothing. She'd pan-fried catfish in breadcrumbs and whipped up some mashed, sweet potatoes with a hint of molasses. A few greens, some corn muffins, a pitcher of homemade lemonade served up in jam-jar glasses and voila! A genuine, we've-still-got-the-house celebration feast.

With double helpings of Rocky Road ice cream for dessert, of course.

Under normal circumstances, Ray would have sooner chewed glass than scrape fried fish remains out of a cast iron frying pan. But as he scoured the battered black surface with coarse steel wool, he found himself enjoying the rhythm of the process. He felt comfortable

standing at the sink, up to his elbows in soapy warm water (never mind the odd fishbone floating along beside). He'd turned the radio on with the volume down low and hummed along to Percy Sledge singing "Take Time to Know Her" as he washed up.

Was Percy Sledge even still alive, Ray wondered?

He was *here*. He was *now*.

Ray shook his head. It was really too much to contemplate, too much to take in. So he stopped and just thought about getting the dishes as clean as a body could.

He was just finishing up with the last of the ice cream bowls when Adelaide sauntered back into the kitchen. She walked up behind Ray and peered over his shoulder into the sink.

"Inspection time?" Ray asked.

"Just making sure you're not a shirker. I like my dishes clean."

"And do I pass muster on the clean dishes test?"

"Hmmm," Adelaide replied.

"What's that mean?"

"You missed a spot or two on that muffin pan."

"What? Where? I scrubbed that tin three times just to—"

Adelaide touched a hand lightly to Ray's back and started to laugh.

"I'm just giving you a hard time."

"Damn," Ray exhaled.

Adelaide withdrew her hand.

"Sorry," Ray said, turning around. "I... I forgot you don't much care for that kind of language. It's just a bad habit I have to try to break."

Adelaide shrugged, but smiled back at him. "It's all right. I mean, it's not as if I don't hear that kind of talk all day at the hospital. And lots worse. I just don't want it in my home, around my boy."

"I'll remember that, Adelaide, honest I will," Ray promised. "Is Lucas in bed?"

Adelaide's smile broadened. "He fell asleep on the sofa, he was so worn out. I went to run his bath and by the time I got back to the living room, he was out cold. Still wearing his clothes and everything. I just took off his shoes and socks and put a blanket over him for now."

"I'll pick him up and carry him to his bed in a bit," Ray said. As if it was the kind of thing he did all the time.

"That would be good, thank you," Adelaide said. "He really likes you."

"I like him, too," Ray said. "He's... He is a really fine boy. You should be very proud of him."

"I know that and I am," Adelaide said. "I couldn't be any prouder. Lucas is so much like his daddy."

A silence descended between them like a thick fog bank. It was the kind of interpersonal awkwardness that Ray had never been very good at dealing with and usually just let linger until it became utterly impenetrable. But not tonight, not with Adelaide.

"Do you mind if I ask what happened to his father?" Ray said.

Adelaide looked up at Ray and he saw some decision-making happening behind her eyes. She started to shake her head very slightly, but then turned it into a nod. She glanced back through the kitchen door, then said: "It's a nice night for early April. Let's go talk outside on the porch."

Adelaide went out through the screen door and Ray followed behind her. She sat down on the creaky canopied swing and patted the seat beside her. Ray sat down and the rusty springs let out a pained screech. Adelaide studied the stars silently for a little while and Ray didn't say a word. He'd always wanted to learn about the stars and the names of the constellations. He now wished he had taken the time to do it just so that he could point them out to Adelaide and impress her. But of course, he never had. Adelaide's reverie was interrupted by the sound of a noisy propeller plane flying low in the sky, descending toward the nearby airport. Still staring up at the heavens, she spoke.

"My husband's name was Jim. James Edward Tyler. A good solid name for a good solid man. I wanted to name Lucas 'Jim Junior,' but his daddy wouldn't have it. Insisted that every man was entitled to his own name. We compromised by making Lucas's middle name James."

"I know," Ray said. Adelaide raised an eyebrow. "I mean that Lucas told me that James is his middle name." Ray explained.

"I still remember like yesterday the first time I laid eyes on Jim. It was my first job out of nursing college. I was working at the army base just south of town. For some reason, they were short of army nurses at the time and started taking on civilian help to see 'em over the hump. All those young boys in uniforms. Mmm, mmm. Not too unpleasant a job for a young girl fresh out of nursing college."

"Why, Adelaide, you devil!" Ray playfully chided. "I would never have suspected it of you."

She laughed and patted his knee. "You know what silly things girls are. It's a far, far cry from an old lady like me."

"You are not an old lady, Adelaide. Jesus!"

"Maybe it's just how I feel sometimes. Anyway, I was nurse on shift one evening at the base infirmary when three young privates come busting in through the door. One of the damn fools had cut up his hand trying to fish some dog tags out from where he'd dropped them under a grate. It was full of broken glass down there and he was bleeding like a stuck pig at a barbecue. They weren't even his tags he was after, but belonged to one of his buddies. This fool was laughing the whole time with the blood just pouring down his arm. Embarrassed, mostly, and trying too hard to cover it all up. I was so busy looking at his hand, trying to find all the cuts and pull out the glass that I didn't even see how handsome he was at first. But he was already looking at me. And then our eyes met. You ever hear of something the Italian folks call the 'thunderbolt'?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be like love at first sight or something, isn't it?" Ray said.

"More like love and lust and fifty years of happy living together all wrapped up in one explosive second. That's what me and my Jim had."

"Wow," Ray whispered.

"Wow is right. One month later we were married. Lucas arrived practically nine months to the day after that."

"Couple of fast workers."

"Never you mind about that," Adelaide scolded. But she had a devilish smile on her pretty face.

"I wouldn't have said I believe in love at first sight," Ray said. "I guess it's never happened to me. Well, I know it hasn't. I've always just thought of it as something out of the movies or TV."

"I wouldn't have believed it, either. It's not part of how I was brought up. But some things just happen in life. Then you believe. 'Cause you got no other choice."

I could tell you a tale about that, Ray thought. "I suppose so." He just said.

"Of course," Adelaide went on, "those fifty years together never happened for us. Though we sure were happy in the time that we had."

"Lucas told me that his daddy was killed in the war," Ray said.

"He told you that?" Adelaide asked. A funny look spread across her face.

Ray nodded. It was hard for him to continue, but he asked: "Vietnam?"

"Vietnam." Adelaide shook her head. "No. Jim did his hitch, but he had his honorable discharge before things went crazy in Vietnam. He never got sent overseas. In fact, he never served any farther away from Memphis than Fort Knox. Keeping America's gold reserves safe from those nasty Russians."

"What happened then?" Ray asked. "Why did Lucas tell me that he was killed in the war?"

Adelaide got up from the swing and paced to the far end of the porch. She watched as a gray and white tomcat crept across the lawn and started sniffing around the overflowing garbage cans by the curb. She hissed at the cat and it darted away across the street. She turned around to face Ray, but didn't close the distance between them. She sat gingerly on the rickety porch railing.

"Lucas was just repeating something foolish he's heard me say about it. Or maybe it's just too confusing for him and he intentionally misunderstands things. He does know that his daddy was a soldier."

"I saw the photograph in the bedroom. He was very handsome. Especially in that uniform."

"That's my very favorite picture of him. That's how he looked when the thunderbolt... when we first met. After he got his discharge, Jim

took a job here working for a little newspaper serving the Negro community. He wasn't a reporter or anything fancy like that, but they took him on to learn to work the presses. The editor was a veteran, too, Korea, and had a soft spot for other vets. Place was full of them. Jim didn't know the first thing about being a press operator, but he was smart and a fast learner. And the job paid good money."

Adelaide crossed her arms over her chest and walked back toward the swing. She didn't sit down next to Ray, but perched on the railing directly across from him.

"This was back in '63. A lot was happening then, but you know about that. The editor of the paper was a big supporter of the movement. He was always writing articles about civil rights and voter registration and all that. Organizing and such. Jim took to listening to it, got all caught up in it. Truth is it scared me a little, but Jim made me see how important it all was. Turned me into a true believer, too. He got more and more serious about it. Intense. He started going out on the marches and demonstrations. Started working on the voter registration campaigns for colored folk. Here in Memphis and around locally at first, then all around."

Ray had trouble believing what he was hearing. It wasn't that he doubted a single word that Adelaide said, but for someone born in 1970, whose awareness of the world and politics and the shape of things didn't truly mature until nearly two decades after that, everything she was talking about felt like ancient history. He had read about it all in school, knew how important and difficult the civil rights movement was, the sacrifices that had been made. But for all the difficulties with racism that African-Americans still faced in the early years of the twenty-first century, the struggle for basic rights was as quaint and strange as black and white televisions. Adelaide might just as well have been describing events from the French Revolution as America in the Sixties. Ray shook his head.

"I know, I know," Adelaide said, misinterpreting. "It wasn't something for a young man with a young family to be getting involved with. But Jim was a man with strong beliefs, and the more he saw and the more he did, the stronger those beliefs became. And his need to act on them."

"I can understand that," Ray said.

"Jim was working for the voter registration drive down in Jackson," Adelaide went on. "This was coming up to the election in '64. They were desperate trying to get our people to sign up and to help them find the courage to get out and vote. They were doing real good with it, too. Signing up big numbers and making some serious noise. It made a lot of people—a lot of nasty, powerful people—very scared and very angry."

She paused and Ray respected the silence. He waited for her to finish the story she had started to tell in her own time, on her own terms.

"Jim and his friends were sleeping in a church just outside of Jackson. They slept on blankets on the hard pews. They didn't mind at all. Would have slept on the cold ground if that's what there was. They had one more day left there to sign up as many people as they could, then they were coming back to Memphis. Back home. That night someone firebombed the church. Tossed in them... cocktails through the front and the back doors. It was an old wooden church, top to bottom. A pretty one, too. people told me after. It had been there near a hundred years. The church burned to the ground that night. No one got out. Not a one. Jim... all eight of them died in there that night."

"Jesus," Ray whispered. "Jesus, I'm sorry."

"So, you see, Ray," Adelaide said, looking him square in the eye, though there were tears in her own, "Lucas's daddy was killed in the war. In a war, at least. That's how I sometimes talk about it anyway; as a war. Maybe that's what got it all muddled up in Lucas's head, I don't know. Who could blame him? 'Cause he loved to hear stories about when his daddy and me met, and how it was when Jim was a soldier and all that boy's stuff. Maybe Lucas finds it easier to understand that his daddy was killed in the war. I mean the war that most people talk about."

"He'll understand better when he's older. He'll appreciate and respect what his father did." Ray said.

"I know that," Adelaide said. "But I dread that, too. I..." She looked off into the stars again. "I want a different life, a different kind of life

for Lucas. Something better. Everybody says that times are changing, that things are going to get better for us but..."

"They will get better, Adelaide. I can promise you that. Things won't be perfect, maybe not even as good as they should be, as we deserve, but definitely miles better."

"How can you be so sure of that?" she asked.

Ray hesitated. How could he tell her the answer to that question? How could he possibly begin to explain what he knew about what was to come without scaring her away, making her think it was just some delusion brought about from the injury he had suffered in the accident? Before he could come up with an answer of any kind, Adelaide changed the subject.

"What about you, Ray?"

"What about me?"

"You've been here with us for two days now. Haven't you got anybody at home? Isn't there anyone waiting for you, wondering where you are? You haven't really said a thing about yourself. There must be some mystery waiting to unfold."

Again, Ray was so tempted to let everything spill out, but something inside held him back.

"No, I'm hardly a mystery man. I wear my whole life on my sleeve. And it's a short sleeve at that."

"I can't believe that," Adelaide said. "There must be a girl out there somewhere calling your name. Wondering why you haven't called her lately."

"No," Ray said, looking away with embarrassment. "No one at all."

"You too busy playing the field, then?" Adelaide was enjoying this.

Ray looked up at her, very seriously. "I've been too busy looking out for myself, I think. Too busy and too preoccupied with my own very petty concerns to make time for someone else. More the fool, me. And now... Now, it's too late."

"Too late?" Adelaide said, furrowing her brow. "Why too late? What's that supposed to mean?"

Ray locked eyes with her. He saw the genuine interest and concern in Adelaide's face. She nodded slightly to spur him on.

Ray thought about the tumor in his head, the merciless and inescapable diagnosis of Doctor Tate. Those dark thoughts merged with ones about the madness of his situation, his impossible displacement in time. It truly was all too much. Too much for Ray Ellison, anyway. Too much, he thought, for any reasonable man.

"Do you think," he said, out of the blue, "that it's possible for a person to get a second chance in life? At life?"

"Ray, I work in a hospital every day. I see people get second, third, fourth... hey, sometimes fifteenth and sixteenth chances. They say the Lord moves in mysterious ways, and you've got to know that's true. You just come to work with me for one shift and you'd see it for yourself."

"But some of them only get that one chance, don't they? Some come in and the doctor looks at them, shakes his head and that's all they get, isn't it? And some never make it in at all."

"This is true," Adelaide said, nodding. "But who knows how many chances they had before that moment?"

"You are one serious optimist, Adelaide," Ray said with a laugh.

"It's the only way I know how to survive. They'd have stuck me in the giggle factory long before now if I didn't see the good side of things."

"What if you're... If I am not an optimist? What do you do if there's nothing to be optimistic about?"

"Then you've got to change your way of thinking, of looking at the world. You can't let some foolish way of thinking get in the way of getting on and being happy in life. Of living your life. I think... I think if a person lives in hope, lives in faith—with the Lord in their heart and good thoughts in their head—then they can get themselves more than a second chance. They can get..." She thought about it for a second. "A fresh start. Yes, a fresh start. Whatever might have come before. I'm living proof. Just look at me and Lucas."

Ray smiled, broadly and genuinely. "A fresh start. Yeah, I think I would like that."

"It's never too late, Ray. I do honestly believe that."

Ray got up to stand beside Adelaide, still leaning against the railing. He wanted to reach out and put his arms around her. He

started to do it, but suddenly went all shy. He pretended to stretch instead, then slipped his hands into his pockets. He felt a piece of paper inside and for lack of anything better to do with his hands, pulled it out.

"What's that?" Adelaide asked.

Ray smoothed out the paper and tilted it slightly so he could read it in the dim light that spread across the porch through the screen door. He had to half-turn to make it out.

It was the flyer that the tall kid in welfare glasses had handed him while he was sitting down in the street earlier in the day. He'd forgotten all about it.

"Something about some kind of rally. There a strike going on in town?" he asked.

"Is there a strike? Where have you been, Ray? You think all that garbage is sitting around 'cause folks love the smell? Sanitation workers been on strike for ages."

Ray shrugged and started to crumple the flyer back up. Then something struck him from above. And below—an explosion through his entire being.

He smoothed the flyer back out and ran inside the house. Adelaide, confused, was right behind him.

"What is it, Ray?" she asked.

"This rally, at the Mason Temple. This is tonight?"

Adelaide took the flyer from him and read it.

"Yes," she said. "Folks have been talking about it all week. I told you, it's for the sanitation workers. They've been organizing the strike action. from the Temple. Jim used to do some of the voter registration work out of there, too. It's a wonderful place. Dr King and Dr Abernathy are speaking for the sanitation workers there tonight. Everybody's been talking about it. Especially about Dr King lending his support. Not that I think it's going to do much good. Do you know that in Memphis—"

"Is this right?" Ray practically screamed. "Today is April the third?"

"Of course it is, Ray. You know that."

"April the Third, 1968?" he demanded.

"Ray, are you all right? Are you having that pain in your head again? Maybe you should lie down for a while," Adelaide urged.

"Don't you understand?" Ray said. His voice was breaking. "Don't you know what tomorrow is?"

"You're starting to frighten me," Adelaide said. She instinctively looked in the direction of Lucas. Ray never even noticed.

"Tomorrow is April the Fourth, 1968," Ray recited.

"Yes," Adelaide said, genuinely fearful now. "Yes it is."

"Martin Luther King," Ray said.

"What about him? He's speaking tonight. That's what it says, what I just told you."

"He's going to be assassinated tomorrow," Ray announced. "At the Lorraine Motel-Martin Luther King is going to die."

SEVEN

The pain was back with a vengeance.

Ray felt it explode out from a tiny spot at the back of his skull. It tore through the middle of his head and blasted on out through his eyes, like Superman's X-ray vision.

This must be what it feels like to get shot in the head, Ray thought. What Martin Luther King is going to feel in a few hours, unless....

It was madness. Complete and utter madness.

And yet, at the same time it made a perfect and almost beautiful kind of sense.

He heard a voice. He heard a name. Someone was shaking him.

"Ray! Ray!"

Adelaide.

He opened his eyes.

Ray was down on his knees on Adelaide's front porch. The street was as quiet as could be and all was right with the world.

Hardly.

"Ray!" Adelaide yelled again. Her voice echoed off into the April night. She was squatting on the ground beside him, one arm draped over his shoulder. He picked up his head, gently shrugging her off. He stood up and started to pace up and down the squeaky wooden slats of the porch. His heart was racing, his head was on fire. Like a speed freak, he couldn't stop moving now.

"Ray, would you just stand still for a minute?"

He took a deep breath and stopped. He found himself face to face with Adelaide. Her expression betrayed a complicated mix of fear and concern. She reached out and took his cold hand between her own, gripped onto him tightly.

"What is the matter with you? Is it your head? What's happening?"

"My head... it hurts, yeah. But that's not it. That's not a problem now. Martin Luther King..."

"What about him, Ray? What in the world are you talking about?"

Ray took a deep breath and tried to get himself together. But no sooner had he exhaled when he started pacing again. He was a big

cat in a tiny zoo cage.

"Ray!" Adelaide yelled again. "Would you stop that? Just talk to me. Please."

"Tomorrow is April the fourth," he said.

"We've just been through that."

"On April the Fourth, 1968, Dr Martin Luther King was assassinated on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee. I don't know how many times I must have heard that said, read that in school."

"I don't understand, Ray," Adelaide said, shaking her head. She looked very frightened now. "How could you possibly know that someone is going to kill Dr King tomorrow? Unless..."

She took a very nervous step away from Ray.

"No. No! Not me. I'm not here to kill him. Oh, Adelaide, you can't even think that. How can I begin?"

Ray finally sat back down on the swing. He rested his head in his hands and groaned. Ever the nurse, Adelaide forgot her fears and sat down next to him.

"Talk to me, Ray," she said. "Should I call an ambulance?"

"No," he said, a lot more calmly. He looked up at her. "I don't need an ambulance or a doctor or a hospital. I think I see things for what they are now. Things... everything that didn't make sense to me until now, suddenly is clear. All the insanity of... Since my car accident. I can see the reason now. I can see the plan."

"The reason for what, Ray? I'm sorry, but you still aren't making any kind of sense to me. And the way you are holding your head, makes me worry. Just wait here for a minute. Wait!"

Ray sat quietly on the swing, contemplating what he had to do. Adelaide ran into the house and he could hear her rummaging through some drawers. When she came back out she had a small flashlight in her hands.

"Look up at me, Ray," she said.

He meekly obeyed. He was too busy formulating his plan to be bothered to pay much attention to what she was doing. He blinked and tried to turn his head away when Adelaide shone the flashlight

directly in his eye. She forced him to turn back toward her and looked into his other eye.

"Ray, you have got a massively distorted pupil in your left eye. Can you see out of it?"

"What?" Ray asked.

"Your left eye. There's something seriously wrong with it. Can you see all right?"

Ray closed his right eye, then his left. Sure enough the vision in his left eye had gone fuzzy. The pain was particularly acute there. How had he not even noticed that until this minute?

"It's fine. I'm all right," he lied. Badly.

"No, you are not all right. I think you need to get to a doctor right away."

"No, Adelaide. There's no time for that now. I know now why I am here. There is something that I have to do."

"No, Ray, there is nothing you have to do tonight. You need some help, some rest."

Ray looked at the concern in Adelaide's eyes—and something more affectionate as well—and was torn about what to do. He felt an urge to run, to get to the rally at the Mason Temple as quickly as he could. But he also felt a genuine obligation to Adelaide. For all that she had done for him, the kindness she had shown him. For Lucas.

"Adelaide," he said, "this is going to sound crazy to you, I know. But I'm going to tell you anyway. You can make of it what you will, but I'm telling you it's the absolute truth. Okay?"

Adelaide nodded. She seemed to gird herself, as if for an attack.

"You remember when I told you that I wasn't supposed to be here?"

"Yes, Ray."

"Well, it's the God's honest truth. I don't mean this house or this street or this city or any of that. I mean that I don't belong in this time, in this year."

"Ray—" Adelaide began. He quieted her with a gesture.

"I don't live in this time, Adelaide. I-I wasn't even born yet in 1968. Aw, heck, my parents haven't even met yet! When I woke up

yesterday morning it was the year 2004. I was in Memphis, yes, but it was the year 2004."

"Oh, Ray—"

"Just listen to me. My life—my sad, pathetic little life—is in that year. Somehow, that accident yesterday sent me... I don't know flying, hurtling into the past. I tried to explain it to you yesterday, but you wouldn't listen. Who would? I was in such a state myself, with my head hurting and being so confused and all. But it's only just all come clear to me now that I know what day it is. And I know what is going to happen tomorrow. To King... Adelaide, it has all already happened. Dr Martin Luther King was shot dead by a man named James Earl Ray on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April Fourth, 1968. Ray went to jail, at least, because... oh, that doesn't matter now. The thing is that it's like ancient history to me, it happened so long ago. But... Damn, I've seen the film of it so many times, read about it in books and in school and...."

Adelaide took his hand again. "Ray. Stop a minute and think. What you're saying is impossible. You can't have traveled back in time. It's... I'm sorry, but it's craziness. No one can go back in time."

"I know," he said. "I know how completely crazy it must sound. I've spent the last two days trying to convince myself that I'm not crazy. Meeting you and Lucas. It's been so nice, so special. You two... You're both wonderful. You two have shown me something I've never had in my entire life. Something I've always wanted and dreamed about and stopped imagining I could ever hope to have. And I was starting to believe, to convince myself, that you two were the reason for what happened, the explanation for it all."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been trying so hard to make sense of it. To figure out why I'm here and why what's happened has happened. I mean there has to be a reason. Then with you and Lucas and your problems with the house and all. I thought: so this is the reason. I'd been sent back here, somehow, to help you, save your house for you and your boy. It made a kind of sense to me."

"Ray..."

"I know, I know. But I couldn't figure out what else it could be. I couldn't see anything. But this flyer, this date. Dr King being killed tomorrow. This makes a lot more sense. The timing of it can't be a coincidence. This has to be why I'm here, can't you see that?"

Adelaide didn't answer his question. She took his hand in her own and sat beside him on the swing staring at nothing on the street. Just thinking. Hard. Then she said: "You started to say something to me before, Ray. A little while ago, before you looked at that flyer and went off about traveling in time. You were talking about being too busy to do certain things. Then you said something about it being too late. What did you mean by that?"

Ray shook his head. He most definitely did not want to go there. He didn't have time and he didn't have the will. She sensed his reluctance, felt him start to draw up inside of himself. She tugged on his hand to pull him back to her.

"I'm asking you for the truth here, Ray. I think I deserve that. I think me and Lucas deserve to know the truth after what we've done for you. I didn't take you in expecting anything in return. Not even thanks. That's not how I think. But after what you've said, after..." She had to think how to say it, was obviously reluctant, but said it anyway. "After starting to feel what I've been feeling towards you. And it's been a long time since I had those feelings, Ray Ellison. And I think you've had them, too. After all that, I deserve to hear the whole truth. All the answers you can give."

Ray still felt a terrible compulsion to get up. To run to the rally at Mason Temple and do what he felt he had to do. To warn Martin Luther King about what was in store for him.

But he felt an even greater need to honor Adelaide's plea.

"You're right," he said. "You do deserve that. And I do know, because I've felt those feelings you're talking about, too. I never expected that, though. Never imagined."

"Then tell me what you really meant," she said. "Why did you say it was too late for you?"

"Yesterday," he began, "thirty-six years from now, I was on my way out of a doctor's office when I got hit by that car. Doctor Samuel Tate, neurosurgeon."

"I don't recognize the name."

"How could you? Doctor Tate's probably about six years old now." Ray exhaled a mournful chuckle. "His office building hasn't even been built yet."

"What were you doing there?" Adelaide asked. "Why were you seeing a neurosurgeon?"

"I've been getting these terrible headaches," he said. "Had 'em long before the accident yesterday. And some funny smells I can't seem to get out of my nose. They come and go at the strangest times and smell of the damnedest things. Some vision problems, too. Can you make a diagnosis, Nurse Tyler?"

"Could be a million things," she said. But Ray saw something knowing in her eyes.

"I truly would like to be your patient, Adelaide. I believe you must provide the finest of care. Not to mention sympathy."

She didn't reply.

"Doctor Tate tells me I've got a brain tumor. A big one. A nasty one. An inoperable one. Ain't that a thing? 'Inoperable' must be the ugliest word in the English language."

"Oh, Ray, I'm so sorry."

"You pays your money and takes your chances, as the man says. Though who that man is, I'm damned if I know. Sorry for my language."

Adelaide just shook her head. "Did he tell you..."

"How long I've got? Man, doctors don't like those questions do they? He went all funny when I asked him. I guess that's something that doesn't change over time."

"Some things are pretty universal," Adelaide said.

"Like death and taxes. Especially death."

Another silence hung in the air between them.

"Six months," Ray recited. "He said I've got about six months. Maybe a little more, maybe a little less. I expect you've heard the speech lots of times in your work."

"A few," Adelaide admitted. "That's very rough, Ray. I am truly sorry."

"Yeah, well, live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse. I'm one out of three, anyway."

Adelaide paused for more reflection and made sure to choose her next words with exceptional care.

"Ray. Given what the doctor—what was his name? Tate?—told you, don't you think that it is at least possible that the rest of your... what you think has happened to you, this traveling back in time notion, that it is all related to the brain tumor? We don't really know all that much about the brain, you know. Tumor patients imagine all kinds of things that aren't there. Tastes, smells. Didn't you say you experienced some strange sense of smell?"

"Yeah, that's what started the whole thing, how I first knew something was wrong. Made a hash out of an expensive date, too."

Ray offered up a shy smile to Adelaide, who couldn't quite bring herself to show him one in return.

"Then don't you think... Can't you consider that it is a possibility that you are imagining this thing? You were hit by a car, Ray. And you do have a brain tumor. Who can say what the combination has done?"

"You think I'm nuts," Ray said baldly.

"No, I did not say that. And I certainly do not think you are nuts. I've been around you in pretty close quarters for two days and you are as sane as anyone I know. But this idea about coming from the year... What was it?"

"2004. And what a time it is. Not. Just wait until you find out about the Taliban."

"How could such a thing be, Ray? That's all I ask you to consider: how could such a thing be? I mean, what proof do you have other than what you know in your head? Or think you know."

"I told you I lost my wallet. That would have proved it. My credit cards, my driver's license, the dates on the money."

"Okay, let's think about that. What about the change in your pockets?" Adelaide asked. "I've never yet known a man who didn't walk around jingling like a Good Humor truck on a summer Sunday. Do you have coins in your pocket with dates on them?"

"I used up all my change on a parking meter before I went to see Doctor Tate. I only just had enough."

"I see," Adelaide said. "And isn't that just a little bit... convenient?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean—and I'm not trying to be cruel or unkind in any way here—that the loss of your wallet and the fact that you haven't got so much as a spare penny in your pocket means there is no way to prove your story. Is there?"

"And that's supposed to be convenient for me? How do you figure?"

"Yes. Okay, it means you can't prove your story, but it also means that I can't disprove it, either. Other than by—and again, I'm sorry, but we are talking straight here—other than by common sense."

Ray thought long and hard about it, yet again, but knew he didn't have any rational answer. He stared down at his hands, looking anywhere for help. Inspiration struck. He held up his wrist.

"What about this? You got these in the year 1968?"

"A bracelet?"

Ray clucked his tongue and rolled his eyes.

"It's a watch. A digital watch! You got digital watches in 1968?"

Adelaide reached out and took hold of his wrist. She studied the silver band that hung around it.

"How is that a watch?" she asked.

"Exactly!" Ray shouted. "You've never seen anything like it, have you?"

"It is odd-looking, I admit," Adelaide said. "But it's just a silver link bracelet with a funny bit of plastic in the middle. If you like it and all, that's fine. I don't think much of it myself."

"But it reads out the time in numbers. LCD, for Christ... for goodness' sake. What the hell does LCD stand for again? Is it liquid? Crystal something or other. Ahh, it doesn't matter. Just look at it. See? It's..."

Ray twisted his wrist around to look and demonstrate. Then he saw that the face was blank. He tapped the button on the side, but nothing happened. He flicked at the face with his fingernail.

"Battery must be dead," he muttered.

"Um-hmmm," Adelaide said.

"Lucas saw it!" Ray remembered. "When I first started to come 'round yesterday. We talked all about it. He can tell you. Let's go ask him now."

"Ray!"

Ray stopped in his tracks. He had literally started to run into the house.

"What?"

"You are not going to wake Lucas up to ask him about your so-called watch."

"Huh? But..."

Of course he wasn't. He could see how mad it must all look in Adelaide's eyes. He slumped back down onto the swing with a great creak of the springs.

He felt defeated. He dropped his head into his hands. He simply didn't know what to do, how to convince Adelaide of the truth of the situation.

Did he really know the truth of the situation? Could she be right about the brain tumor and the accident?

"You don't believe a word of it, do you?" he said.

He could hear Adelaide exhale a long breath as he continued to stare at the wooden floor slats.

"Ask me about it," he said, looking up and holding her gaze. "Why don't you ask me about the future? What's going to happen in the world? In Lucas's world. Wouldn't you like to know what's to come, what the future's going to bring?"

"I don't know if I would," Adelaide said. She sat back down next to Ray on the swing and took hold of his hand again. "I don't know—even if everything you say is true—if that would be such a good thing to hear. You got to live day by day and take what comes your way. Knowing what was up ahead, well, that is a tempting thing. But you know who the great tempter is. And the price that you got to pay for taking his bait."

Ray nodded. And he remembered then some of the movies and stories about time travel he'd seen and read over the years. All those episodes of *Star Trek*. They always hinged on how you were never

supposed to change the past for fear of unsettling, even destroying the future. There was that old canard about what would happen if you went back in time and killed your grandfather before you were born. What would the paradox mean for you? How could such things be?

But Ray wanted-needed-to change his future, because the truth of it was that he didn't have one. If he messed with the past, however slightly, might it not offer even the smallest chance that he wouldn't end up with a deadly brain tumor in the future?

And what about Martin Luther King? What if he hadn't been felled by that assassin's bullet thirty-six years in the past—or rather, tomorrow—how might everything have been changed? Had the world, had America, become a better place in the decades since King's murder? Not just for African-Americans, but for everyone? If Ray messed with history tomorrow, what else would change? Would Nixon still become president? Would Reagan or the Bushes? Would the Mets still miraculously win the World Series next year? Would there be moon landing or AIDS or Osama Bin Laden? Would the Berlin Wall fall? What about the Twin Towers? Would they even be built in the first place?

Would any of it still happen if he did what he was thinking about doing?

It really was too much to imagine. The pain in his head returned with a vengeance and he clutched at his temples and dropped to the ground.

"Ray!"

Adelaide got down on the floor with him and threw her arms around him. She could feel him trembling, and hear him moaning. She held him tighter and gently kissed the top of his head.

Ray just sat there, the maelstrom of confused thoughts swirling around his head. What to do? What to do? What to do? Why was he here? What could it all mean? What to do? What to do?

He thought about the past and the future. The life he'd known and the life he wished for. The person he'd always been and the man he knew he should be.

Could yet be.

With a will he wouldn't have believed he possessed, Ray just pushed Adelaide away.

"Ray, you are in pain. Please come inside and lie down. Get some rest."

Ray Ellison was in pain. Physical and spiritual pain. Emotional torment.

But he was sure now of what he had to do.

"I can't, Adelaide," he said. "You have no idea how much I want to. Just come inside and rest there with you and Lucas and..."

He shook his head. Resisting that great tempter. Adelaide was right about that.

"I can't, though. I have to try and save him. Save myself, too, maybe. Who can say?"

"Ray?" Adelaide asked, shaking her head.

He stood up and lifted Adelaide up as well. He bent over and gave her a soft, chaste kiss on the lips. He pulled away before she could even react.

"Where is the Mason Temple from here? That's where he's speaking tonight, isn't it?"

"It's not far. Mile-and-a-half, maybe two. Just up on Mason Street, nearly straight on from here. But Ray—"

"I'm sorry, Adelaide, but I've got to go. Please trust me. And remember me if you can."

"Ray?"

And with one last, longing look he was gone. Running.

Adelaide just watched him go, not knowing what to think, what to feel.

She never even noticed Lucas, awake, sitting by the window, watching and hearing everything.

Ray Ellison ran.

He ran for all he was worth. The decision about what to do now having been made, he felt a raw, instinctive, desperate need to carry it out. He ran down street after street, past the houses and

businesses, the piles of garbage. Through the cars and traffic, ignoring the blaring horns and shouted curses. Knocking aside other people—many also on their way to the Temple to attend the rally—without so much as an "excuse me" or a "sorry". Running without any thought other than what it was he had to do.

Running, running, running.

Running and thinking only about running. Not, definitely not, thinking about Adelaide and Lucas and the possible life he might have left behind in that sweet, simple little house; a new and different life to which he more than likely would never be able to return.

The streets grew more crowded and Ray, determined as he was, found that he had to slow to a jog in order to force his way through the throng. From more than two blocks away, he could see the bright spotlights up ahead that illuminated the enormous stone block of the Mason Temple. A huge neon sign in front announced Church of God in Christ. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of people were milling about all around the church, spilling down the big stone steps and out onto the sidewalk and streets beyond. There were also cops everywhere, lining the sidewalks and manning the intersections at every corner.

Every last one of the cops was white and many of them toyed with the black billy clubs in their hands. They looked like they were not merely ready for trouble, but were positively willing it to happen. The situation was potentially explosive.

As Ray drew to within a block of the Temple, he couldn't even proceed at a jog. He was reduced to a slow walk, trying to slip his sweaty body between the seemingly solid mass of humanity—almost entirely black humanity—that filled the street and sidewalks. He used his elbows and shoulders to plow his way through as best he could, ignoring the annoyed "Watch it, brother" and "What you doing" that were bellowed in his wake. He didn't have time to apologize for all the feet he stepped on, the pained yowls and yips as he forced himself relentlessly on toward the main entrance of the temple. It was only as he managed to burst his way out of the crowd at the top

of the big, stone steps that it dawned on him that he'd been hearing history ringing in his ears without realizing it.

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead."

Loudspeakers had been set up all around the front of the Temple. There were simply too many people to pack inside, so the speeches were being relayed to the gathered faithful via huge speakers set up all around the outside of the building. The voice—and how many times had he heard the recording of it played back from the past?—the sonorous, rich, moving voice was that belonging to Dr Martin Luther King.

"But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind."

Ray stopped in his tracks. He felt a shiver go down his spine. His heart, already racing from the long run from Adelaide's house to Mason Temple, skipped its double beat.

"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place."

For all the stunned genuflection that Ray had engaged in since coming to on that street corner after being hit by the car, for all the musing and consternation over the impossibility of the situation in which he found himself, the truth of it, the sheer amazement and wonderment of it only now truly hit home. He was listening to Martin Luther King deliver one of the most famous speeches of the twentieth century.

Ray Ellison stood stock still as tears began to flow from his eyes.

"But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

The people went wild: men, women, children. All of them had tears streaming down their faces. Some fell to their knees in prayer, others screamed and cheered and clapped their hands together fiercely

enough to pound coal into diamonds. "Amen" was called from all corners.

Something in Ray's head went *BANG!*

He fell to the ground—there were so many others there—until the pain passed. Slowly, slowly, he got back up. The multitudes were still cheering. Ray remembered his mission, why he was there. He pushed his way past a barricade and made for the huge front doors of the temple.

"Whoa there, chief," a cop called out. He was one of three standing by the front doors, blocking access to the Temple. He wasn't carrying a nightstick, but he held up a beefy hand and pressed it against Ray's sweaty chest. "The inn is full tonight. Y'all gonna have to listen to them from out here with the others."

"You don't understand," Ray gasped. The pain in his head was building up again. "I have got to get inside. This is an emergency."

"No chance, Jaspar," said a second cop. "Back into the bleachers with your brothers."

"NO!" Ray shouted. "I have got to get in there, don't you understand? I have got to tell him, got to warn him."

Another bolt of pain practically dropped Ray to his knees, but he fought it off, wincing and groaning as he did so. The cops exchanged a look. The third officer put his hand on the end of his nightstick.

"Just be a good fellow now and get down off the steps," the first cop said.

"Officer," Ray squealed.

"You got a hearing problem?" the third cop said, stepping up. "Now you—"

Ray shook his head and tried to bolt past the officers. He wasn't thinking, just moving on instinct and adrenaline, knowing what he had to do, focused only on his self-appointed mission.

Two of the cops grabbed him.

"Just calm down now, boy. We don't want no trouble here."

But Ray continued to squirm and dodge. He could see the open doors and the light coming out from inside. He could hear the impassioned cheers and cries for Martin Luther King. There was pandemonium all around him. He was so close.

"I've got to warn him," Ray shouted. "Dr King! Dr King!"

"That's it," the third cop said.

Ray saw the policeman come around from the side, nightstick raised over his head.

"NOOOO!!" Ray shouted.

The cold, hard wood made contact with Ray's head with a crack like a gunshot.

Everything went black.

EIGHT

A smell.

Before the light, before the pain, before the awful remembering, came the smell.

Piss. Shit. Vomit.

Oh, man, the stink.

Ray opened his eyes.

"Gaaaadaaaaamn!" he screamed.

Raucous laughter rang out around him. Then the sound of someone hocking up the mother of all lugies and spitting it out against the wall just above Ray's head. It impacted with an even more disgusting *splat!*

"You see? The mutha is alive," an oily voice said.

"Shee-it! I know'd he was alive," a crackly voice answered. "I done tol' you he was alive."

"You liar! Pants on fire! You say he were dead."

"I just e-speculatin'. I know'd really he were alive."

"What about that one over there then? You still think he dead?"

Ray was lying on the floor. He figured out that much. With his face to the wall. A very dirty brick wall, with a thumb-sized slug of a lugie slowly sliding down towards him. He grunted again.

"You alive, you prick?" Oily Voice called.

"Unnnnggh," Ray managed.

"That's a yes."

Ray rolled over into something wet. A trail of urine. Not his own. He wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

"Ahh, shit," he said.

"No, brother. You still about six inches from the shit. Y'all keep rolling, though, and y'all gonna get there."

Ray stopped in his tracks. He turned his head away from the wall and saw a roomful of black faces staring at him.

Correction; not a room.

A cell. A prison cell.

It was maybe twenty feet square, bounded on two sides by walls of filthy concrete blocks and on the other two by steel bars floor to ceiling. The floor was cold concrete, with an open drain in the middle. A metal bench ran the length of one wall. Half a dozen prisoners sat on it, several of them sleeping. Another dozen men loitered about the cell, hanging onto the bars or pacing back and forth. Another woeful looking case was sacked out on the floor a few feet from where Ray lay. Ray had to admit that the other guy did look pretty dead. The two men who had been speculating on the matter, Oily and Crackly, sat on the bench immediately across from Ray, still watching him. Both smoked roll-up cigarettes.

"Where am I?" he asked them.

The taller and older of the two, Oily, smiled an ugly smile. He was missing a substantial number of teeth, and those that were left in his mouth weren't looking too good.

"This here's the Memphis Hilton. You in the Honeymoon Suite, baby. Ready for some action?"

His pal, Crackly, elbowed Oily in the side. "Leave him be, now," he said. "You in the West Precinct, brother. You in the holding tank."

"West Precinct," Ray mumbled. "Mason Temple?"

"Temple about three miles from here," Crackly told him.

Ray naturally looked at his wrist, but his watch was gone. So, he realized, was his leather jacket.

"Do you know what time it is?" he asked.

Someone laughed at the question.

"It always happy hour here at the Hilton," Oily said, and laughed and laughed.

For some reason, Crackly seemed to take pity on Ray. "Can't see no clock from here, but I reckon it's about eleven, eleven-thirty."

"Morning or night?" Ray asked.

"Morning," Crackly told him.

"They bring around yo' room service any minute now, baby," Oily squeaked. "I think it eggs benedick today." Another cackle.

Ray pulled himself to a sitting position out of the pool of urine. There was no place to sit on the bench and he wasn't ready to try his feet just yet.

Then he remembered.

"What day is it?" he begged, scrambling to his knees.

"Today George Washington birthday!" Oily proclaimed with another crazed laugh. He truly was his own best audience.

"It's Thursday, man," Crackly told him.

Ray was too confused to work out the days. "The date?" he pleaded.

"You got a hot mama waiting on you, Romeo?" Crackly asked. "I don't know what date it is. It's Thursday. One Thursday good as the next."

"It's the fourth," a voice called from across the cell. An elderly black man who looked as if he'd started drinking sometime during the Civil War and hadn't stopped since. Though he seemed pretty sure of himself. "It's April fourth today. My Ginny's birthday."

That elicited a warped chorus of "Happy Birthday to You" from among the assembled. They stumbled a bit on the "Dear Ginny" part, but otherwise didn't do too bad a job. Several of the inmates clapped afterwards and the Civil War vet nodded his appreciation at the effort.

"It's not too late, then," Ray muttered.

"What happened to you, brother?" Crackly asked. He gestured with his chin at Ray. "You got a knot as big as a lemon upside your head. John Law give you that?"

"I was at the Mason Temple last night," Ray said. "Trying to get in to tell him. They wouldn't let me. I had to warn him and..." Ray dropped his head into his hands. The now familiar pain was coming back with a vengeance.

"Y'all should ask to see the doctor," the old man said. "That's police brutality what they done to you. And you a religious boy and all. I never did like Memphis. Never should have moved here."

"How long you been here, Gramps?" a fat kid in the corner asked.

"Let's see now. Today the fourth. That makes... uh... thirty-seven year!"

Why am I here, Ray wondered? Why am I listening to this?

"How do I get out of here?" Ray asked Crackly.

"What you in for?"

"I don't know," Ray confessed.

Crackly just shrugged.

"They dump you in here, it can't be too serious," said the old man.
"Y'all better call for a guard."

Ray dragged himself to his feet. For a minute he felt like he'd left his head on the floor in the piss and shit. He wobbled, stumbled over a sleeping cellmate who growled in his drunken sleep, but caught himself against the wall.

"I help you," the old man said. "Gonna miss. Ginny birthday, anyhow."

The old man called a guard over by name and whispered to him. He evidently was a regular at this particular Hilton franchise. Probably ran a tab. The guard beckoned Ray over with a finger.

"Y'all got a name, son?" the guard asked.

"Ray. Ray Ellison."

The guard nodded and wandered off. Ray spied a steel sink in the corner of the cell. He stumbled over and nearly wretched at what he saw in the bottom of the sink. Turning his head away as much as he could, he twisted the faucet on anyway and managed to splash some water over his face. He cupped his hand and drew some of the foul-tasting water into his mouth. He rinsed it around then spat it out into the sink, trying not to look.

Was that what I thought it was, Ray wondered? He didn't want to know.

Oily and Crackly were back to arguing as to the possible state of life of the man still crashed out on the floor. Oily whipped his dick out and sprayed the poor bastard with a stream of piss. The unconscious man only stirred slightly, but it was enough for Crackly. He nodded and slapped Oily's hand.

Ray then felt a twinge in his head. Another little flare-up of the pain that never entirely went away. What the hell was going on inside his skull? He rubbed the back of his neck and massaged his temples with the palms of his hands. It helped. Slightly.

Ray turned his attention elsewhere, trying to distract himself. There wasn't much on offer. Most of his cellmates slept or moped. Only Crackly and Oily showed any signs of interest in anyone else.

Two of the other inmates were engaged in a heated discussion about baseball. They were discussing the prospects for the Braves in the upcoming season. They were talking about Hank Aaron and Babe Ruth's home run record. Would Hammerin' Hank ever really crack it?

Ray just wished he could lay some money on it.

A teenaged junkie sprawled out in the corner of the cell started to twitch in his sleep. He convulsed once or twice, then briefly opened his eyes and coughed. Ray started to look away when the kid had another spasm. His raggedy coat came undone as he jerked, momentarily revealing the T-shirt he wore underneath.

Ray did a double take; there was a Tommy Hilfiger logo on the shirt.

It couldn't be.

Designer T-shirts—never mind Tommy Hilfiger—weren't even a marketing dream in 1968.

Ray scrambled over to the kid, who had curled back up into a ball. Ray reached down to pull the coat back open. He wanted another look at that shirt.

"Whatchoo doin' to that boy?" Oily called out.

"His shirt," Ray tried to explain. "It's..."

At that moment, the guard returned.

"Ellison?" he called out.

Ray had to see the boy's shirt again. He looked up at the guard. The kid turned to face into the wall.

"One minute," Ray pleaded.

The guard shrugged. "Screw you, then," he spat.

"No!" Ray yelled. He ran over to the bars and called the guard back. The officer rolled his eyes, marveling at his own tolerance, and stepped back to talk to Ray.

"We got no Ray Ellison, Ray Ellison," he said. "We got a John Doe on a disorderly, though. That you?"

Ray was confused for a minute then realized that, of course, he'd had no ID on him. There was no way they could know his name.

"Yeah, that's me. Listen I have got to get out of here."

"Officers that booked you are off-duty. But they ain't going to want to bother with this petty stuff,.I know 'em. You can make bail?"

"Of course," Ray said. "I..."

He didn't have any money. He didn't even exist in the year 1968.

"Uh-huh," the guard said, and started to walk away.

"No, wait," Ray called out. "I have got to get out. It's a matter of life and death."

"Really?" said the guard, suddenly interested. "I never heard anyone say that before."

He laughed and started to go again.

"Can't someone else bail me out?" Ray called.

The guard turned around and gave him a cold, hard appraisal. "Is there someone?" he asked. He looked dubious.

Ray hesitated, but only for a moment, and nodded his head.

Would she really come?

The guard opened the cell door.

Ray glanced back one last time at the sleeping junkie then followed the guard to a telephone.

Adelaide was sitting on a hard wooden bench, trying her best to keep her distance from the various lowlifes and degenerates that surrounded her in the police station. Every so often she would give a little shake of the head. She had the look of someone who'd spent her whole life trying to keep out of places such as this and could not now believe that she was sitting where she was. Ray felt awful for having dragged her into the situation; having had to drag her into the situation.

She looked up at the sight of Ray coming through the security gate, his arm tightly gripped by a uniformed officer. The gate buzzed open and the officer walked Ray around the big desk and pointed at a spot on which he was to stand. Ray tried to conjure a reassuring smile for Adelaide, but it was one seriously dead rabbit that came out of that particular magician's top hat. Adelaide offered an equally feeble smile back at him.

"Wait here," the desk officer said, and disappeared among the filing cabinets.

Ray couldn't help but glance up at the clock. It was going on four-thirty. Ray hadn't been able to get through to Adelaide right away. In fact, Lucas had answered the phone at their house. Ray didn't want to explain to Lucas that he had been arrested and had to duck and dodge to convince the boy to tell him how to get in touch with Adelaide, who was at work at the hospital. The guard then didn't want to allow Ray to make a second phone call, but ultimately was too tired to argue with Ray's pathetic pleading and let him go ahead and make the call. Ray almost fainted. with relief when Adelaide answered the phone herself.

"You're where?" Adelaide had said, clearly shocked.

"I got arrested at Mason Temple last night," he'd told her, mindful of the guard standing next to him and listening to his every word. "It's a long story and I don't have a lot of time here."

"But you had time to call Lucas from jail?"

"I didn't tell him where I was. I... Adelaide, I need someone to bail me out. It's a hell of a... sorry, heck of a thing to ask, I know, but you're the only one I can turn to. You know what's at stake."

That elicited a very long silence.

"Adelaide?"

"I don't know, Ray," she'd told him. "I honestly don't know what to do, what to think."

"Please. Please trust me. If nothing else, I'm begging you to still trust me."

A long sigh. "I'll be there soon as I can. But I got to finish my shift first," she'd said.

"Thank you. Thank you, Adelaide. But please hurry. I don't know... how much time there is."

And he still didn't know. He assumed from the relatively calm state of things in the police station that the assassination hadn't happened yet. But he couldn't really be sure. For the life of him—and that just might have been what was at stake—Ray couldn't remember what time of day it was that King was shot. He had a fuzzy mental picture of the great man on the motel balcony in daylight, but daylight was

quickly running out. For all he knew a finger could be pulling the trigger that very second, while he was waiting on some bureaucratic lackey to find his paperwork.

"Come on, come on," he cajoled under his breath.

The officer reappeared. He had a sheaf of papers, which he filled in with all the speed of a paraplegic snail. Ray kept looking up at the clock. Four forty-five, and counting. How much time did he have left? How much time did King have left?

"Ma'am?" the officer called out to Adelaide.

She got up, walked over and stood next to Ray.

"You sure that you want this one?" the officer asked. "He's kinda whiffy. Looks like trouble to me."

Adelaide seemed to consider the question very seriously. And Ray did, indeed, stink of urine and the bodily odors of the holding cell. For a terrible instant he thought that she might really change her mind.

"I'll take him," she announced.

"You got to sign here. And I need to see some cash. No checks here."

Adelaide opened up her bag and took out her purse. She counted out one hundred and fifty dollars in five and ten dollar notes. The last five was in silver. No pennies, thank goodness. Ray felt pangs of guilt course through him. It was likely all the money she had in the world. He imagined the silver coming from Lucas's piggy bank.

"That's it," the officer said, double-counting the money just for the insult and stapling together his paperwork. "I'll just get the prisoner's things."

The man disappeared through a doorway. Ray wanted to run outside, but knew that wouldn't be a very good idea.

"Thank you," he croaked to Adelaide.

"Umm, hmm," she replied. She still hadn't really looked at him.

After what seemed a small eternity, the officer returned with a big paper bag. Ray's leather jacket was inside, along with his still broken watch.

"Funny bracelet," the officer said, looking it over before handing it back.

Ray took his things, signed the last form and was told he could go. Adelaide stiffly put her purse back into her handbag, gathered her coat around her and led the way through the station and out the front entrance.

"Adelaide," Ray started, but he didn't know what to say to her. The best he could muster was: "I'll pay you back. Somehow. Someday."

"That's not important," she told him. She turned to face him there on the steps and looked him square in the eye for the first time that day. "What happened last night, Ray? Why were you in there? What is going on?"

He again started to look at his wrist then caught himself. He desperately felt the need to get to the Lorraine Motel, but he couldn't just leave Adelaide standing there with no explanation, no goodbye. There was so much that he wanted-needed—to say to her.

But it was getting dark.

"I haven't got much time. You know that. It's true in... all regards, but it's more true than ever today. I've told you what it is I have to do today, why I'm here. It's the only thing that makes any kind of sense about this craziness."

"Ray—"

"But you have got to know that I am not crazy. However crazy the situation and all that I've told you might seem. I promise you that it is all true and that is all for real. If I do what I have to do, well, I don't know how you'll know that I'm not crazy. If I can get to that motel in time and stop the assassination, then you'll only know that nothing seems to have happened. But if I can't do it..."

Adelaide emitted a very hollow laugh. "I guess then I'll know you weren't lying."

Ray shook his head. The mere act set off another little detonation somewhere inside and he couldn't hide the wince of pain.

"Oh, Ray, I'm sorry, but you are not a well man. I should have got you to a hospital right way. First thing after that accident. I should have found a way. I think I've done you a terrible disservice. Some nurse I am."

"No!" Ray practically screamed. He gripped Adelaide by the arms and gave her a little shake, as you might an errant child. "You did

exactly the right thing. You did a good thing. That's because you're such a good person. I've never known anyone like you in my whole life Adelaide, and I wish I could know you better. I wish we... I had the time to really get to know you. To talk with you and to spend time with you. To be with you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I do," she croaked.

"I care about you, Adelaide. I care about you and Lucas. And I'm sorry for what I'm putting you through. The craziness, the jail, the money... all of it. But you have to know that I do care for you."

"We care about you, too," she said, tears now rolling down her cheeks. "I... care for you."

Ray took Adelaide in her arms and gave her a fierce embrace. He leant over and kissed her passionately on the lips. A couple of passing degenerates whooped and hollered with delight, but neither Ray nor Adelaide so much as heard them.

Ray broke apart the embrace.

"I have got to go now, Adelaide. I'm out of time."

"We're never going to see you again, are we?" she said. There was no question there.

"I... I don't know. I hope so. More than anything, I hope so. But I don't know what today is going to bring or where it's going to take me. I think it might lead me back home. Though even if I get there, it will never seem like home again."

He started to go, then turned around and gently held her face between his hands.

"Thank you, Adelaide. Thank you for everything. For showing me... everything I always wanted and didn't know I could ever even hope to find."

He kissed her lightly on the lips. He turned and ran off without looking back.

He never heard the three words she whispered into the wind as he went.

Ray Ellison started to run again. He ran down the block housing the police station and made it as far as the corner when the realization struck him.

He didn't know where the hell he was. Or how to get to the Lorraine Motel from wherever he was.

He knew the motel was on Mulberry Street and could picture on the map in his head where that was. In Ray's own time, the motel had been transformed into a civil rights museum and was a popular place for tourists and scholars of the era. Ray had been there once himself with a friend who was visiting town and announced a desire to see it.

It's not the sort of place that Ray—the old Ray, at least—would have gone to visit of his own accord.

But now Ray was just plain confused. He recognized the street names, but couldn't fit them onto his mental map. He was tired and upset and stank of piss...

And increasingly desperate as the sun set lower in the sky.

How much time was left?

He looked around, then ran up to the first person he saw: a middle-aged, black woman in an ankle-length skirt and broad purple hat. She had on white gloves and hummed what sounded like a hymn to herself.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Ray panted at her, "but do you know how I get to the Lorraine Motel?"

The woman appeared startled at first, but then a sly smile crept across her lips. She leaned in closer to Ray, not bothered at all by the smell of urine wafting off him, it seemed, and whispered: "I think you got to get yourself a girl first, big boy."

And she walked off, humming her hymn.

Flabbergasted, Ray just stared after her.

The next two people he stopped offered him entirely contrary directions for how to get to Mulberry Street. The third enigmatically said: "Practice, practice, practice."

The biggest, fattest, whitest cop that Ray had ever seen came waddling around the corner at just that moment. Utterly bereft, Ray

carefully approached the officer and asked if he could tell him the way to the motel.

The cop not only gave him precise directions, but tipped his cap when he was done and wished Ray a pleasant day.

So go figure.

Ray turned the corner as directed and started to run, when his feet got swept out from under him. He went ass over teakettle and landed hard on the sidewalk. Another tiny depth charge went off in his frontal lobe. It was okay, though, he was getting used to them.

It wasn't until he started to get up, ready to run, when he realized what—or rather who—he had tripped over.

"Lucas!" he yelled.

The boy and his bicycle were in a tangled heap on the sidewalk. Lucas had scraped his hands pretty badly and torn the knees of his trousers, but otherwise looked unharmed. He was studying the slightly bent frame of his bike.

"Lucas, what are you doing here, son?"

"Hey, Ray," was the boy's reply.

Ray looked up at the ever-darkening sky. Was he already too late? He couldn't know for sure, but he couldn't just take off and leave Lucas there on his own like that.

"Lucas, why are you here?"

"I followed my mama," he said. "She came home after you called and said she had to go out. I asked where she was going, but she wouldn't say. She told me to stay put and do my numbers."

"Well, why didn't you? You shouldn't be riding around out here on your own. What's the matter with you?"

Lucas suddenly went all shy and looked down at his feet.

"Lucas!" Ray demanded.

"I guessed maybe she was coming to see you," Lucas said. "So I followed her here and then I saw you. You kissed her."

Ray didn't know what to say to that. Lucas saved him.

"That's all right. She ain't been kissed in a while. I think she liked it. Only, are you in trouble, Ray? That's the police station you come out of. Officer Bryant didn't give you more trouble, did he? I could talk to him again if you want me to."

"No, no. I...." Ray didn't even know where to begin. "Listen to me, Lucas. I am in a big hurry, okay? There is something very important that I have got to do, someplace I have got to be. You just get yourself back on home now. You'll be all right. That bicycle doesn't look too badly damaged to me."

"I want to go with you, Ray," Lucas pleaded.

"Lucas. You cannot go with me. Not... where I'm going. Now, you be a good boy and go on home like I told you. Your mom will be worried about you."

"I heard you last night," Lucas said.

"What?" Ray said. "What did you hear?"

"I heard what you and Mama was talking about. Somebody gonna 'sassinate Dr King. About where you from and where you going. I heard it all. And I want to help you."

Ray didn't have any more time. He shouted: "Lucas! Just. Go. Home."

And he turned away from the boy and started to run. But Lucas wouldn't give up. He called after Ray: "You're supposed to be here, Ray. You're supposed to stay with us. This is where you really belong. I'm sure."

Ray stopped dead in his tracks and turned to look at Lucas.

"You belong here," Lucas said again. "I know it!"

Ray walked back over and knelt down in front of Lucas. He placed his hands on the boy's shoulders and looked him dead in the eye. Neither of them so much as blinked.

"You listen to me now, Lucas. This is not where I belong. Much as you or I or even your mama might wish it was. But it is not."

The sun had nearly set, but Ray couldn't go. Not quite yet.

"I'm not sure what my... visit here is all about," Ray explained. "I got an idea, but I can't know for sure. But I do know what I told you is true and I know that what you told me—your secret—that's true, too. Isn't it?"

The boy nodded.

"Then you remember this and you remember it good: you fight for what you want. Like I told you before. Remember?"

Ray touched a finger to Lucas's head then pressed his palm to the boy's heart. Lucas mimicked the gestures to Ray.

"I will fight the fight," he said. "I will change my life."

"That's my boy," Ray said, smiling. "Don't you ever forget it!"

"I won't," Lucas promised.

Ray touched the boy's cheek with the back of his fingers. A small tear spilled out of Lucas's eye.

Ray turned. And he ran.

NINE

Exercise had never really been one of Ray's favourite things. The whole "body as temple" and "no pain no gain" philosophies had never struck a resonant chord with him. He wasn't philosophically opposed to getting into shape—for a few years he played racquetball on a fairly regular basis, and he could still enjoy a friendly game of three-on-three basketball on a dull Saturday afternoon in the park around the corner from his apartment—but he knew he didn't look after himself as well as he probably could and should. It had never really mattered so much when he was younger. When you're in your twenties you seem to cling on to some natural, youthful stamina and agility that requires no training, no effort. It's when you turn thirty that everything suddenly seems to go to hell on an express train.

Ray Ellison was in hell's seventh circle right now. And sinking.

His troubles started with a tiny stitch in his right side. It was the kind of thing you might expect to feel if you were running all out, hard as you could when you knew you were not exactly in top shape, (Not to mention after having been beaten senseless with a billy club and spent the night passed out in someone else's piss on concrete jail cell floor. Oh, yeah, and with a brain tumor eating away at you to boot.) Ray just pressed his elbow into his side as he ran, trying to ignore the pain and thinking only of the importance of what he had to do.

That worked for a whole two blocks of running.

Ray reckoned he had a good mile and a half left to run to the Lorraine Motel. There are sons of bitches who can run that distance in six minutes, Ray thought to himself. Surely, I can make it in ten?

The stitch in his left side suggested that the notion was something more fanciful than a pipe dream. He used his other elbow to press against the pain. He gritted his teeth.

And still he ran.

"Gotta keep going, gotta keep going," Ray chanted to himself.

The muscle burn started to set in another block or two down the road. He felt it in his left thigh, first, then his right. He was running

in his work shoes. Black leather Florsheims purchased for economy and durability, with toes that pinched. They were most definitely *not* designed for running as fast as you could go. What he wouldn't give for a pair of Nike sneakers right now.

"Gotta keep going," he panted.

And still he ran on.

The streetlights were starting to come on and the darkening twilight above him spurred Ray to greater effort. He started to feel the pain in his shins and ankles and was puffing and gasping for breath. Every desperate gulp he inhaled was a lick of flame scorching his lungs. Every thudding step on the hard sidewalk felt like a live electric wire applied to his calves. Was the pain worse in his thighs or in his chest? Nope, it was his right side. Take it back; definitely the left side.

"Gotta keep going," he yelled out.

Passers-by gave him worried looks and a wide berth.

It was the explosion in the back of his head that finally forced him to stop. The pain was so bad this time that his already tired knees buckled, and he only kept himself from falling face-first onto the pavement by grabbing onto the pole of a traffic light. He pressed his face against the pole and the cold metal felt good against his hot forehead.

"Gotta keep going," he wheezed.

But he didn't move. He couldn't move.

He was all in.

Ray stood there, eyes closed, slumped against the traffic light. His breath came in ragged gasps and waves of cold sweat cascaded down his back.

"Can't go on," he whimpered.

Then he heard something.

A song. He thought nothing of it at first; just another tune blaring out of a passing car window. Not something he particularly liked, but something he knew. It seemed like you couldn't miss hearing it on the damned radio every single day.

Eminem. God how he hated Eminem. What in the world did people see in that pathetic white boy anyway? And the song was

some self-indulgent blather where the rapper moaned about how misunderstood he was. Gee, it's so damned tough being rich and famous and...

Rapper?

Eminem?

Ray's eyes opened wide.

The car and the song it was blaring disappeared somewhere into the dusk. He couldn't tell where it had come from or where it had gone. Ray saw nothing but late Sixties cars around him on the street. But...

Eminem's mother was probably a kid in 1968. No way that song could be playing on the radio in the here and now. That is to say, the there and then.

What the hell was happening to him now?

Ray knew that his time was running very short.

He looked up at the street signs and saw that he had reached the intersection with Mulberry Street. The Lorraine Motel was located on Mulberry; it couldn't be too much farther now.

Against his body's better judgment, Ray started running again. He stared only at the pavement in front of him, watching his feet. Right foot, left foot, right foot, left foot. Every stride bringing him closer to what he was there to do. Every brutal impact with the cracked concrete taking him toward his destiny.

Right foot, left foot.

The pain returned, but Ray fought it off with a sheer force of will he would not have believed himself to possess. Without even knowing he was doing it, he started singing a song to himself in his head. Over and over again. Thinking only about the silly words and not the pain. Just the stupid little rhyme:

*All around the mulberry bush,
The monkey chased the weasel,
The weasel thought it all in fun,
POP goes the weasel.*

Every time the word "pop" came up, Ray saw a terrible vision of the shot that would soon kill Martin Luther King.

And it made him run that much faster, take that many more painful steps. Sing one more chorus to keep himself going on.

With nothing left inside of him and that awful children's rhyme playing on an endless loop inside his deeply pained skull, Ray dared to look up.

He could see the big sign for the Lorraine Motel only two blocks ahead of him.

Ray whooped with delight. He picked up the pace.

From a block away, Ray could see the famous balcony on the second floor. It was actually just a passageway linking the two identical blocks of rooms that comprised the motel. As he watched, a door opened and three African-American men stepped out of one of the rooms. Ray was still too far away to be able to see their faces, but he knew who it had to be. He started waving his arms and yelling at the top of his strained and pained lungs.

"Back inside, get back inside!"

The traffic had grown much heavier near the motel with both pedestrians on the sidewalks and cars in the street. Ray paid none of it any attention. He started moving and bounced off an obese black man walking a tiny dog: its owner yelling "Hey!" Ray pinballed off the side of a parked car and into the street at the intersection. Horns blared all around him and brakes squealed. He heard the awful rasp of metal on metal as three cars collided in the intersection trying to avoid his teetering form.

"Dr King! Dr King!" Ray screamed.

His voice was hoarse and thin. There was no way that it could be heard from that distance.

Car doors slammed.

"Yo, asshole!" he heard someone yell at him.

He just pressed on, undeterred. His desperation was growing.

In an overflowing concrete trash bin on the corner, he caught a glimpse of something bright red. It was half of a tattered protest placard in support of the sanitation workers' action. Ray stopped and ran over to pull it out of the bin. He raised it up over his head as high as his arms could reach. He waved it back and forth as boldly as

possible, still yelling King's name. He started jumping up and down like a crazy person.

He was a crazy person.

Two of the three men on the balcony were looking in Ray's direction. One of them pointed at him in the street, and Ray saw King himself standing there.

Dr Martin Luther King cocked his head slightly and curiously studied what appeared to be an approaching protester. The man was oddly dressed and looked evidently disturbed. One of King's companions then said something and the civil rights leader's attention was diverted.

"No, Dr King! Look at me, please," Ray shouted. "Go inside, go back inside!"

But Ray had no voice to command. And none of the three men on the balcony were paying him any further notice.

Ray's energy gave out. Looking anywhere for some help, he glanced up at the row of buildings behind him.

And spotted the barrel of a sniper's rifle poking out of a window from across Mulberry Street.

"No," he whispered to himself. Then he found his voice to shout again: "NO!"

But the men on the balcony still couldn't hear him. Or they weren't listening. Ray stepped back out into the street and got sideswiped by a passing car; its horn blaring out anything Ray could try to scream. He stumbled back onto the sidewalk, the pain from the impact with the automobile not even registering on him. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the rifle barrel waver slightly, then go stock-still.

Ray Ellison took a deep breath, preparing to scream for all he was worth. To literally scream the lungs out of his chest if that's what it took to make himself heard. To change history, as he knew he was meant to do.

But then someone called out his own name.

"Ray?" he heard.

It came from the middle of the street behind him. He half-turned to glance over his shoulder.

Lucas.

It was the boy, riding his damned bicycle down the middle of Mulberry Street, bent frame and all. He must have followed Ray all the way from the police station. Or maybe he remembered what Ray had told Adelaide from the night before about where he had to go and what he meant to do.

"Lucas," Ray gasped. "No, boy."

And that's when he saw the yellow Buick Le Sabre.

It was making the turn off the intersection and onto Mulberry Street. And it was coming fast. Much too fast.

"Lucas!" Ray called out.

But the boy wasn't paying any attention to Ray's words. He had a big smile on his face and started pedaling faster and faster.

Right into the path of the big yellow car.

Time froze.

Ray looked up at the balcony, at Dr Martin Luther King and his impending fate.

He saw Lucas, smiling to beat the band, his mouth half-open to holler out Ray's name.

He saw the yellow Buick, looming. Its powerful engine racing. The driver nothing but a dark shape behind the wheel in the gathering dusk.

And somewhere—a peripheral sight? an unholy vision?—the shadow of a rifle barrel poking out of a window. Steady, ready. A finger curling around a trigger. A black face trapped in the crosshairs. History in the balance.

There was only time to save one of them.

Ray gathered all his strength. There wasn't a lot remaining.

He took one stride, two, then bent his knees and threw himself into the air, hurled himself into the street, straight at Lucas. The boy's smile faded into a gasp of surprise and fear.

Impact occurred and Lucas flew off his bicycle. Time only then to flick his eyes to the left and see the yellow monster from Detroit bearing down on him. Ray felt the world come to a dead stop around him.

The Le Sabre struck Ray full on, sent him flying up into the air. He bounced off the hood. Once, twice.

He landed on the cold black street with a bone-shattering thud.

The Le Sabre never even stopped. It accelerated off down Mulberry Street; its red taillights blinking once at Ray like some mocking demon's eyes in the night.

Lucas ran over to him. Incredibly, the boy was unhurt, though tears streamed down his face.

"Ray! Ray!"

The boy threw himself to the ground on top of Ray and embraced the older man in a death grip. He pressed his cheek against Ray's bloody chin.

"You okay? You gotta be okay, Ray. You gotta be okay."

"Lucas," Ray wheezed. He tried to reach up, but he couldn't seem to make his arms work. "You gotta... gotta stop him... You gotta warn..."

CRAAACK!

A gunshot.

Single. Loud.

Unmistakable.

A lone voice of thunder. A solitary bass note of death.

The implacable, inescapable echo of history.

People started to scream all around Ray and Lucas. Fingers pointed up at the second floor of the Lorraine Motel. Cars came screeching to a halt and doors slammed. Ray was sure he could hear the anguished cries from the balcony a mere half-block away.

So close, he thought. I came so close. And the tears rolled down his face.

"I didn't save him," Ray cried. "I didn't save him."

Lucas looked up at the motel balcony. He squinted at the rush of activity there, seemed to be working something out for himself.

"But you saved me," he said.

Ray turned his head and looked at the boy. Lucas was crying, too. Ray strained to take in the scene around him. Everyone seemed to be crying: men, women and children. Tears and pain were all around. The entire world had come to a sorrowful stop on its axis.

"Lucas?" Ray said.

"You saved me, Ray. Thank you for saving me."

Ray reached out to touch the boy's cheek, but felt instead another massive explosion go off in his head. Hiroshima times Nagasaki. The end of the world.

His vision started to fade.

"Lucas," he croaked. He felt the boy drop his head against his chest. Somehow he lifted his arm off the street and held Lucas in a last embrace.

Ray heard sirens approaching, the screech of brakes. From very nearby he could hear the unmistakable sound of a cell phone ringtone. It was playing the theme tune from *The Simpsons*.

He heard nothing more as total darkness took hold.

TEN

Ray is riding on a train. He is a passenger on a New York City subway car, an old one of the type that used to feature on the Number Seven Flushing Line when Ray was a boy. The car has actual leather straps for the standing commuters to hold onto as the car rocks, not the cold steel bars that characterize modern cars. It was these selfsame loops that gave rise to the sobriquet of "straphangers" to the poor, tortured souls who had to clutch on for dear life as the sardine cans rattled their bones taking them on their way to and from work at rush hour.

Ray once spent a whole summer vacation in New York—in Jackson Heights, smack dab in the middle of the dreadful Number Seven Line—with his aunt and uncle and two cousins when he was ten years old. Those subway trains had been out of date even then and he only ever once sat in one of the cars with the real straps. His uncle took him and his cousins on the train to Shea Stadium to see the Mets play the Pirates. The Mets lost big time, of course, but Ray had two hot dogs, a bag of peanuts, a vat of Coca-Cola and got bought a baseball cap as a souvenir. It had been a great day and he'd loved baseball ever since.

The lights on the train flickered on and off, on and off. Ray sat alone at the far end of the long subway car. The train rattled and shimmied as it moved at high speeds and even sitting down Ray had to hold onto the back of another seat to keep himself from sliding out of his chair. He kept trying to read the advertising placards pasted up high above the windows of the car, but the lights flickered too fast and he couldn't make out any of them.

There was nothing to see through the windows—only darkness. The train must have been racing through a very long tunnel.

Without warning, the lights went off and stayed off. Ray was sitting in total darkness now. He thought perhaps he should be worried. The New York subways were notoriously unsafe and there he was all alone. In the dark.

But he felt perfectly calm, entirely at peace.

There was an odd comfort to be taken from the jittery, regular motion of the train. The vibrations of wheel on track echoed up through his bones. He could feel the rattle in his teeth and in his ears. The tips of his fingers felt as if they'd been electrified—in safe contact, somehow, with the normally deadly third rail. It felt like a fairground ride.

The lights flickered on again and Ray was able to see that someone else was now sitting at the far end of the car. Even at a distance, he could tell that it was a woman, but then the car suddenly went dark again. How had she embarked the train when it hadn't stopped? She must have passed through from one of the other cars, though Ray hadn't heard the noisy slam of the bulkhead-like connecting doors. And women didn't usually do things like that; it always seemed to be menacing-looking teenaged boys who broke the rules and walked between cars while the train was still in motion.

The train lurched as it pulled into a station. The platform outside was entirely deserted. A swirl of candy wrappers whooshed up in a tiny twister as the train rushed in and then slowed to a stop. The big signs suspended over the quiet platform identified the station as Martin Luther King Boulevard.

Ray was pretty sure there was no such stop on the Number Seven Line. As far as he could recall, there wasn't a Martin Luther King Boulevard anywhere in New York City.

The lights in the train were still off, but illumination flooded into the train from the platform. He glanced down the length of the subway car and saw the woman stand up as the train drew to a halt and the doors opened. Then she turned her head to look at him.

It was his mother who stood there.

"Mama," Ray cried out.

He tried to get up. His legs had gone to sleep and he couldn't rise off the subway bench. His mother smiled a sad little smile at him and offered the tiniest of waves. Just a wiggle of her fingertips really, as she always used to do when she dropped him off at school.

She stepped off the car and out onto the platform. The doors closed even as Ray still struggled to stand up. The train started to move once again.

"Stop," he yelled. "Hey! Stop the train. Please!"

But the subway merely began to pick up speed.

Ray looked all around for the emergency brake. It was contained within a little glass box above the doors with the red letter notice: "Fifty dollar penalty for misuse." Ray ignored the warning and tried to break the glass, but it held firm. He pounded on it with his fist, but it wouldn't break.

He let out a tiny sob.

Ray crawled onto the seat on his knees, face pressed against the glass to watch the last of the platform slip away behind him.

It was empty again. His mother wasn't there. No one was there.

The train plunged back into the darkness of the underground tunnel.

Ray wanted to scream his frustration, but found that he had no voice. Nothing but a strained croak emerged no matter how wide he opened his mouth, how loudly he tried to yell. Panic began to well up inside of him.

The lights inside of the train came back on. Just like that, the car was full of people.

"Hey, buddy, you want to move it? You ain't the only one with an ass, you know. I want to sit down, too."

A big, white guy—it was Officer Bryant, though he wore no uniform and his Memphis drawl had gone all Brooklyn—was staring at him, eyes wide, mouth twisted in exasperation. Ray glanced down at himself, and saw that he was sprawled across three seats on the crowded subway car.

"Oh. I'm sorry," he muttered, voice returned. He swung his legs down and sat up properly in the one seat. "My mistake, pardon me."

Officer Bryant rolled his eyes and clucked. He sat down next to Ray, leaning well into Ray's personal space as he unfolded and shook out his tabloid newspaper. Ray glanced at the front page over the man's shoulder. It featured a near-full page photo of Martin Luther King sprawled in a large pool of blood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The sixty-four point headline screamed: *WHO SHOT THE MONKEY?!*

"That ain't right," Ray said, shaking his head. "They shouldn't be saying that."

"The uppity nigger had it coming," Officer Bryant told him, eyes still glued to his paper. All around, heads nodded in agreement.

"I've got to get off here. This is my stop," Ray suddenly realized as the train again started to slow.

This platform was filled with people. The signs. identified the stop as 2004th Avenue.

Ray had to push and shove his way through the crowded car to get out. The mass of people on the platform were all trying to squeeze their way onto the train, making it a struggle for Ray to exit. He had to throw an elbow or two and kick a few shins before he could force his way out. Ray had then found himself alone again on the platform as the train doors slammed shut behind him. The subway train didn't immediately pull out, though. Ray shrugged and searched for the stairs leading to the street exit.

"Ray!" a thin voice called out.

He turned around.

Pressed up against the thick glass of the nearest door was Adelaide. She looked young and frightened and was cradling a baby in her arms. She was trying to keep the baby—it was Lucas, Ray knew—from also being squashed against the door. Adelaide offered Ray a rueful smile, but it was Lucas who was calling his name.

"Ray," the baby said, and it waved its tiny arms.

Ray saw that Adelaide and Lucas were getting more and more crushed against the door by the seething mob inside. He heard Adelaide yelp with pain as someone inside the car stepped on her.

Ray pounded on the outside of the door, but it wouldn't open. He scanned the length of the train for some sign of a conductor, but no head poked out of the windows. He saw Adelaide and Lucas sink beneath the still-expanding mass of humanity inside the car. He glanced up and down the platform for any kind of help, but there was no one else there. No one at all.

He couldn't see them through the window any more, but still baby Lucas called out his name, with greater and greater urgency.

"Ray. Ray! RAAAY!"

Ray Ellison opened his eyes.

"Can you hear me, Ray?" the voice called. "Can you see me?"

The room was dimly lit, but the light still hurt Ray's eyes. He turned his head and felt a tug at his neck.

"Unnghh," he spluttered.

His mouth felt thick as a field of cotton. He tried to poke his tongue out through lips so dry they felt as if they'd been sewn shut. Something cold and wet swabbed at them. A few drops of water leaked into Ray's mouth and he devoured them like a hungry man let loose on a seven-course meal.

"It's okay, it's okay," the voice said. "Take it easy, Ray. Slow down."

Shapes were becoming more distinct. A man and a woman hovered over him. He was in bed. Cables snaked out from his wrists, his chest, his head. No, not cables: tubes.

He was in a hospital bed.

"Where?" he rasped.

"You're in the hospital, Ray. You're in Memphis General. You've been in an automobile accident."

The voice was so familiar. Ray squeezed his eyes shut, opened them again and found some focus.

Doctor Samuel Tate was looming over him. A young, African-American nurse wearing a smile and concern in equal measure was by his side. She leaned over and dabbed at his lips again with a cold cotton swap. A few more heavenly drops slipped down his parched throat.

It felt wonderful.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, my friend," Doctor Tate said. He smiled broadly. "You gave us a little bit of a scare there."

"I don't..." Ray muttered. He couldn't seem to complete a thought.

"Do you know your name?" Doctor Tate asked. He was shining a penlight into Ray's eyes. Right eye first, then the left.

"Ray," he said.

"Yeah, well, I've already given you that much, Sherlock. Can you win the really big money and tell me your last name?"

"Ellison. My name is Ray Ellison."

"Good answer. You're heading for the jackpot now," the doctor said and smiled. The nurse nodded. "Let's try something a little bit harder: what year is it?"

Ray honestly didn't know what to say. It was all coming back to him now: the visit to Tate's office, the car accident, Adelaide and Lucas, and was all of that just a dream?

"Is it 2004?" Ray said, with no small uncertainty.

"Let's book this man on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*" Doctor Tate said. He turned to the nurse. "Is that still on? God how I hate that damned show. Give me *Jeopardy* any day of the week."

"Am I...?" Ray was still having trouble making thoughts cohere.

"You've been unconscious, Ray. You were on the receiving end of a very bad hit-and-run car accident on your way out of my office. That was three days ago. We were starting to wonder if you were planning to come back to us at all."

"It was a dream then. It was all just a dream."

"What's that, Ray?"

Ray saw Adelaide's pretty face spinning in front of him. And Lucas. And Oily and Crackly and all the rest. Dr Martin Luther King. The great man looking down at Ray with puzzlement from that cursed motel balcony. All the mad happenings of 1968, all of it just in his head. His poor, tumor-ridden, car-stomped, addled misery of a head.

He closed his eyes. At least it made sense to him now.

"Ray!" he heard. "Stay with us, Ray."

But try as he might, he couldn't do it. Blessed darkness took charge of Ray Ellison one more time.

Except his time it was all light.

A vast plain, tall grass waving in the warm breeze. The giant yellow sun warm on his face, the scent of honeysuckle thick in the air.

This must be heaven, Ray thought. He wasn't troubled by it. How could he be? Everything felt... perfect.

"Hey, Ray," Adelaide said, coming up beside him. She slipped an arm comfortably around his waist and he put his arm around her shoulder as she nestled into him.

"Has Lucas gone to sleep?" he asked.

Adelaide offered up a broad smile. "Like the proverbial baby. See?"

She pointed off to the right, and there was Lucas, dozing in a swinging hammock strung between two bowed palm trees. The trees hadn't been there a second ago. But that didn't bother Ray, either. Nothing could bother him here. He smiled at the sight of the sleeping boy.

"He's a good boy," Ray said.

"He's *my* boy, mister. He's the best."

"I'm just glad he's all right, now," Ray said.

"He's fine and he's going to stay fine. We're all of us going to be all right," Adelaide said. "Aren't we?"

"Never felt better," Ray said, nodding.

"And your head?"

Ray ran his fingers across his scalp, over the plate and down his neck. He'd been shaved and his skin was as smooth as a baby pumpkin. It felt kind of nice, actually.

"It's just fine," he said. "The pain's all gone now."

"That's good. That's the way it should be."

They stood there in the grass, basking in the sun, occasionally glancing toward Lucas and enjoying just watching the boy sleep. The simplest and greatest of pleasures.

"What now?" Adelaide asked.

"What, what?" Ray answered, smiling.

"You know," she said. She poked him in the side with a finger. "I mean what do you want to do now?"

"This is good," Ray said. He surveyed his serene domain again and nodded. "This is real good."

"I think so, too," Adelaide said.

So they just stood. And enjoyed the splendor of it.

"Hey, Ray," Adelaide said after a while. "Hey, Ray. Hey. Hey. Ray. Ray..."

"Ray. Ray!"

Ray opened his eyes and groaned.

He was back among the living. Well, he was with Doctor Tate, anyway.

"There you go," the doctor said. "You drifted away again. You've been out of circulation for another six hours. You here to stay this time?"

Ray looked around the still dimly lit hospital room. A private room. At least he was getting some use out of that serious insurance of his. There was no nurse around, this time, but someone else was standing in the corner, hunched over and reading a chart beneath a gooseneck lamp. Ray couldn't see his face. Another doctor, judging from his hospital greens. He walked out of the room with the papers before Ray could get a decent look at him.

"Memphis General," Ray said. He knew exactly where he was.

He wished more than anything that he could go back to the place where he had just been.

"That's the 'A' answer. Now tell me this: how are you feeling?"

Ray took inventory. His mouth still felt like an acre of cotton. His legs and ass felt numb and he had become all too aware of the catheter that was draining urine from his bladder in the most uncomfortable but efficient possible way.

"My head hurts," was what he said. "Surprise, surprise."

Doctor Tate nodded. His eyes flicked to a monitor that started beeping over Ray's head. He reached up and punched a button on it to turn off the alarm.

"I'm not surprised," Tate said. "And on that front, I've got some good news and I've got some good news. Which would you like to hear first?"

Ray squinted at the doctor, who now had a goofy smile plastered across his chops. It was the exact same smile he had seen on Tate's

face in the photo of the doctor and his family on the man's office desk. Ray grew instantly suspicious.

"I'll take the good news first," he dared.

"Okay. The accident which put you here wasn't as bad as it seemed. I told you earlier that you'd been unconscious for three days. Do you remember that?"

"Yeah," Ray said. "Cheap holiday, huh?"

"Not in this joint. Wait until you see the bill. But the thing we were worried about was swelling of the brain. You took a hell of a knock from that car and came down on your head. Lucky for you that noggin seems to be steel reinforced."

"Yellow Buick," Ray said, looking past Doctor Tate.

"How's that?"

"The car that hit me. It was a yellow Buick Le Sabre. A '68, I'm almost certain."

"I think the police will want to talk to you about that. The accident went down as a hit-and-run. An Officer Bryant's been by looking to interview you a couple of times now."

"Bryant!" Ray exclaimed.

"You know him?"

Ray offered a dusty chuckle. "No, I don't think so. It's a common enough name, isn't it?"

Doctor Tate just shrugged. "I guess. As I was saying, the good news is that we took another scan while you were in dreamland, and there is no evidence of residual brain swelling. In fact, things look... well, as close to normal as they can be given your other circumstances. We're going to get some of those tubes out of you in an hour or two. It will make you feel a lot better. You'll be able to eat, too. Though it's not exactly haute cuisine here. Even with that bill."

Ray just nodded. The phrase "given your other circumstances" ricocheted around his head. All of his twenty-first century reality was back with a vengeance. "Aren't you going to ask me?" Doctor Tate prodded.

"Ask you what?"

"About the *good* news?"

"You are messing with the wrong brother, brother," Ray muttered, shaking his head. Perhaps he hadn't quite shed all of 1968 just yet.

"Go o—o—on," Tate implored. "Ask me."

"Okay, Doc," Ray sighed. "What is the *good* news?"

"You remember that neurosurgeon I was telling you about in my office the other day? The specialist who is pioneering a new treatment for brain tumors with stem cell therapies?"

"Yeah, I remember," Ray said. "The treatment that could maybe save my life if I can knock off a couple of dozen banks first. Maybe pan for some gold."

"That's the one. Well, I presented your case to him and he's reviewed it thoroughly. And he has agreed to take you on."

Ray closed his eyes, shook his weary head then opened his eyes again.

"Say that again?"

Doctor Tate laughed. "He is going to take you on as a patient, Ray. You are in. He will underwrite the full cost of the program."

"I must still be unconscious, Doc, 'cause this is surely some kind of a dream. You want to pinch me and wake me up?"

"No, no," Doctor Tate said. "This is no dream. In fact, he's here right now. He was performing surgery on another patient here earlier today and when he heard you had come around he insisted on staying so he could meet you right away. He... He was just here a minute ago..."

Doctor Tate held up a finger and walked out of the room. Ray honestly didn't know if he was awake or asleep. What year was he in? Whose life was he living?

How much could one meek soul bear in a week?

Doctor Tate opened the door, chatting to someone walking behind him. A big man, looking even bigger in the slightly-too-small hospital greens, stepped into the room. Ray could see he was African-American, but couldn't make out the face as he was facing away from the light from the open door. The two men strode up to Ray's bedside.

"Ray, I'd like you to meet Dr Lucas Tyler. Lucas, this is Ray Ellison, who you already know. At least by X-ray and MRI."

Lucas Tyler, all six-foot-three of him, stepped firmly into view. He was broad in the shoulders and narrow of waist: a man who clearly looked after himself physically. His hair was closely and neatly shorn, with just a hint of distinguished gray at the temples. He had deep-set brown eyes that shone with intelligence and a sly smile that curled at the end of his lips.

A large Port Wine Stain birthmark covered his upper left cheek.

Ray Ellison felt the entire world drop away from under him. It plummeted into the cosmic abyss faster than the speed of light. All at once, Ray was under the volcano, over the rainbow and through the looking glass, six ways from Tuesday. If a unicorn named Boom-Boom Goldfarb had come up and danced the hula on the rim of a drinking glass, Ray could not have been any more astonished.

He was living the impossible.

"Lucas..."

"Tyler," the big man said. He held out his hand. "Doctor Lucas Tyler. It sure is nice to see you, Ray."

Ray somehow summoned the will to raise his arm and take hold of Lucas's hand. Doctor Tyler had a firm, warm grip. His nails—a surgeon's hands, after all—were immaculately manicured. Ray could feel the man's strength and power, his total self-confidence in one little handshake.

"Doctor Tyler..." was the best Ray could do.

"I want you to listen to me now, Ray," Lucas said. He grabbed a chair from the corner of the room and sat down next to the bed. He leant over Ray and took firm but gentle hold of his hand once more.

"I don't want you to worry about anything from now on. I know that's easy for me to say and darned hard for you to do. But it's the way things are going to be."

"Darned hard?" Ray asked.

"That's right," Lucas said, not skipping a beat. "Doctor Tate here happens to belong to the same health club as me. That's how we got to talking about your case. I have reviewed your notes in depth, studied all the tests and scans and I believe that you are an ideal candidate for my new program. Your particular form of metastasis is

what my treatment has been designed to address. I need you, Ray. And I think you need me, too."

Ray was still so dumbfounded that he couldn't get the lost look off his face. Lucas seemed to misinterpret.

"What I'm saying, Ray, is that you have the right kind of cancer. That's a heck of a statement, I know, but in this case it just might work out for you. In fact, I am confident that it will."

"Heck," Ray repeated. Lucas ignored it.

"I've just received a huge grant to progress the study to the next level, so money isn't an issue. You understand? You don't have to worry about the cost."

Ray felt tears beginning to well in his eyes.

"There's no time for that stuff," Lucas said firmly. "That's over with now. There is only one thing I ask of you before we take this trip together."

"What's that?" Ray asked. He wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"This isn't going to be an easy thing, Ray. This is a tough treatment and there are no guarantees. I say to you again that I feel very confident about you, but if this is going to work...."

Lucas paused and carefully considered what he wanted to say. He lightly scratched at the birthmark on his cheek then said, "You are going to have to fight to get well, Ray. Fight like you've never fought for anything in your life.

"You have to fight from here." Lucas touched a finger to the side of Ray's head.

"And you have to fight from here." He pressed his palm to Ray's chest, against his rapidly beating heart.

"Can you do that, Ray? If you can... well, you can have your life. You can change your life. Don't forget that."

"I won't," Ray whispered.

"So can you do that?" Lucas asked. He looked serious as hell, but that odd hint of a smile suddenly appeared at the corner of his lip. "Are you willing to fight the fight to change your life how you want it to be?"

Ray nodded his head.

"What did you say?" Lucas asked.

"I am. I am willing to fight."

"Good for you, Ray. Good for you."

Doctor Lucas Tyler stood up, squeezed Ray's hand once more and walked out of the room.

"You get some rest now," Doctor Tate said. "You've got a hard road ahead. But you do have a road, Ray. You surely do have a road."

Doctor Tate left Ray alone in the room.

Ray stared up at the clean white hospital ceiling. Tears started to pool in his eyes again, but he wiped them away and wouldn't allow for any more. He studied the whiteness above and his vision passed beyond the plasterboard six feet over his head. He looked upon another place, another time.

He saw a little boy walking next to him down a Memphis, Tennessee Street strewn with overflowing garbage that rustled in an April breeze. The boy asked if he could tell Ray a secret and made him promise not to laugh. Ray promised and the boy whispered in his ear.

"I want to help people," he whispered. "I want to make things better for everyone. Like my daddy done."

Ray smiled.

Some things you can fight for. Some things you can save. Some things you can make real.

However impossible and however crazy they might seem.

Ray's vision passed even farther beyond. To a tall grass field and a man and woman standing in embrace, with a little boy asleep in a hammock nearby. The sun is bright and the wind is warm and sweet.

I must remember, was Ray's last thought as sleep overtook him again and dream became reality, to ask Doctor Tyler about his mother.

Ray Ellison was looking for a fresh start and he only had to go back thirty-five years to find one. This brighter future brought to you by... The Twilight Zone.

THE POOL GUY

Based on the Teleplay by Hans Beimler

ONE

Our second story concerns one Ritchie Almares, a man who appears to have not a care in the world. But appearances can be deceiving. Especially in that shadowy place we call... The Twilight Zone.

The brake pedal sank all the way to the very dirty floor and Ritchie Almares unleashed a stream of curses under his breath. That was all he needed right now: failing brakes. He would bet the rent. money, for that is exactly what it would have to be, that he was going to have to lay out for new discs and pads. Knowing Ritchie's luck, the drums were probably shot, too. And when had he ever once brought his old Dodge pick-up truck into the shop and that son of a bitch mechanic, who was supposed to be a friend, had not found at least two other things that simply had to be dealt with before the truck could safely go back out on the road? In this case, even if it was only the discs and pads that needed replacing, Ritchie knew he would be looking at a couple of hundred bucks for the repairs. Minimum.

Ritchie Almares, unfortunately, didn't have a couple of hundred bucks to his name.

Ritchie Almares, very unfortunately, didn't have much of anything. Ritchie had an old pick-up truck with the words "The Pool Guy" stenciled on the doors, though even the letters were chipping. He had the meager tools of his trade: a box full of assorted pool chemicals and testing gear, a collection of old skimmers, an odd assortment of filter and hose parts, and a monkey wrench. He had the torn T-shirt on his back and the peeling, red flipflops on his forever-sunburned feet.

To call a spade a spade, Ritchie Almares didn't have jack shit.

Ritchie sighed.

He managed to coast the truck to a stop at the top of the driveway of the Hunt mansion. Fortunately, the lengthy drive sloped gently uphill. Doubly fortunate, the driveway was so lengthy. Otherwise Ritchie might have plowed right on through the tall cedar fence that

bounded the big Brentwood property. And how much would something like that have cost to repair?

At the very least it would have cost Ritchie his job. And he most definitely couldn't afford anything like that.

Ritchie stared up at the big house belonging to Mister and Missus Jerry Hunt. It was a sprawling ranch house with a vaguely Spanish influence, like so many residences in Los Angeles. But the original house had been modified and extended and added on to so many times, in so many contrary ways, that it looked like a big old mish-mash to Ritchie. Though he had a funny feeling that it was supposed to look all jumbled up like that. He once heard the hot tub guy talking to the mailman about the place being so postmodern, whatever the hell *that* was supposed to mean.

And the pool guy never got to work as the hot tub guy, too; in fact, hot tub guys invariably regarded themselves as a vastly superior breed to pool guys. They definitely got to charge more—hell, it was a specialty!—and they always drove better and newer trucks. Ritchie hated hot tub guys with a white-hot loathing.

Ritchie had never been inside the house, of course. Pool guys don't usually get invited into the very fine houses whose exterior plumbing and fixtures they service, though he had peered through the windows on those occasions when the opportunity arose. It never ceased to amaze him how it was that in the same city in which he lived, just a few miles up the road from his own shared and pretty damn squalid apartment in Palms, the likes of the Hunts enjoyed the splendor and luxury that they did. Ritchie often tried to imagine what it might be like to live such a life in such a house: with a kitchen as big as his whole apartment and a refrigerator the size of his pick-up truck. He knew that there was a pool room inside the house—as in billiards, not swimming—and wondered if the Hunts employed yet another pool guy to look after that.

With the Hunts' money, he would have bet that they did.

If he had had anything to bet with, that is.

Nervously Ritchie set the emergency brake on the old Dodge. That, at least, seemed to still work all right. He opened the door and got

out, giving the front panel a little back kick as he slammed the door shut. He'd show the damn truck who was boss.

His flip-flopped foot left a small dent in the fender. Ritchie had forgotten that the front end on the driver's side was mostly putty and paint after he got into that last fender bender on the Santa Monica Freeway. He hadn't dared to claim on his insurance to get it fixed properly because he couldn't risk what it would do to his premiums. It was only a month after that, though, that he gave up on the insurance altogether. Who needed vehicle insurance in LA anyway? It just wasn't the done thing these days, at least among Ritchie's crowd.

He looked at the dent. "God have mercy," he whispered, shaking his head.

He went around to the back of the truck to get his gear. He hauled out the extra long skimmer, noticing with a sigh that there was a big hole in the green net at the end, and a five-gallon container of chlorine treatment. Barely a couple of fingers' worth of the pool chemical sloshed around at the bottom of the big jug. There might just be enough to get the job done at the Hunts' today. However, there was no way he was going to be able to get the PH levels balanced to what they were supposed to be. To what he was being paid to make them. And then he'd have to stop by the chemical supplier before he could do any more work. He didn't know what the Hunts got up to in their kidney shaped pool (did they all pee in it together?) but it always seemed to need twice as much chlorine as any other place at which he worked.

Still, the Hunts were due to pay him for the month today, and they were usually good for cash in hand. Ritchie had a stack of bills and debts laying claim to every penny of that cash, but he'd be sure and restock his work supplies first. No chlorine, no cleaning. No cleaning, no money. No money...

Well, no money, no Ritchie. A simple equation, really.

Ritchie started to work. He extended the pole on the skimmer and began cleaning the worst of the flotsam from the top of the water. There was the standard assortment of leaves and dead insects; for some reason dragonflies were everywhere in Los Angeles this

summer. Ritchie had grown up in Southern California but had never seen so many of the ugly creatures before. And there were a few bits of plastic and cellophane which must have drifted in on the wind. Ritchie didn't mind the work of a pool guy, really. It was kind of relaxing for the most part, spending the day poolside, out in the sun. Not to mention being his own boss, which was important to Ritchie. It wasn't like a holiday or anything, and he did sometimes come across some bits of nastiness in people's pools, used condoms being the most common and distasteful item, but really there were worse jobs out there.

Ritchie knew; he'd pretty well tried them all at one time or another.

As he turned off the filter and opened up the housing to give the works a clean, he realized he wasn't alone at the Hunt mansion. He glanced over his shoulder and saw a Latino gardener shoveling deep, black manure into a freshly turned bed of flowers. The gardener looked to be all of about twenty, his skin browner than Ritchie's and his muscular arms bulging out of his short sleeves. His arms were a mass of ugly tattoos. He wore a light blue jumpsuit with the name "Cheto" embroidered over the breast pocket. As he turned to throw another shovel of shit onto the flower bed, Ritchie saw that the name of the company he worked for was stitched on the back of the uniform: Erinyes Landscape Services.

That's a funny name, Ritchie thought. Probably Russians or eastern Europeans. They seemed to be taking over all the manual labor jobs that had formerly been the province of the Latino community in the city. But then, he knew that as a group Latinos were generally moving on up the ladder.

Except for me, Ritchie thought.

Cheto spotted Ritchie watching him just then and nodded in acknowledgement. Ritchie offered a grudging semi-nod in return. More a flick of the chin, really.

If hot tub guys looked down on pool guys, then pool guys definitely looked down their snouts on gardeners. It was the way of things. Unless, of course, they were Japanese gardeners, some of whom

made as much money as the movie stars who hired them. They looked down on everybody; including their celluloid hero clients.

Cheto shoveled a final load of manure onto the soil, stuck his shovel into the pile and wiped at his brow with the stripy red bandana he wore around his neck. He took advantage of the moment to stroll on over toward Ritchie.

Aww, Christ. Ritchie scolded himself for having returned the nod. This is what happens when you screw with the order of things.

"Hey, bro!" Cheto called out as he approached.

Ritchie offered another slight movement of the head. A semi-nod.

"You're the pool guy, right?"

Ritchie looked down at the skimmer lying next to his foot, at the open housing of the big filter he was working on. He glanced at his truck, sitting in plain view at the top of the driveway with "The Pool Guy" logo plainly visible even from the distance. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head slightly at Cheto the gardener.

"Good guess," Ritchie said.

Cheto just smiled broadly. His teeth were preternaturally white. You could get a tan off the reflected sunlight from them. Cheto simply stood there, nodding and smiling at Ritchie. He crossed his bulging, inked arms over his chest.

"What?" Ritchie demanded.

"Looking good, bro, looking good. You know, I been thinking some about changing professions."

"You don't say."

"Yeah, it's the truth. I'm thinking maybe it's time to throw down the shovel for good. Try something else. You know what I'm saying?"

"You don't dig the gardening?" Ritchie said.

Cheto laughed. "Hey, that's good, that's good. I got to remember that, bro."

Ritchie glanced down at the filter again. He really needed to get back to work so he could collect his pay and get the hell out of there. He had things to do and talking to the gardener wasn't top of his list. Cheto didn't take the hint, though. It seemed that Ritchie had made a new friend.

"No, the landscaping, it's okay, you know? But it's not where my head is at right now. I got bigger things in mind. There's more for Cheto than flower beds."

"Uh-huh," Ritchie said. He squatted down to get back to work on the filter.

"Tell me true now. Like, what does it take to become a pool guy?" Cheto asked.

That caught Ritchie's attention.

"Say what?" he asked.

"Yeah," Cheto drawled, "a pool guy. What you got to do, man? How you get where you at?"

"Why would you want to be a pool guy?" Ritchie asked.

"C'mon, bro, you talking to Cheto, here! Look at you, man. You your own boss, moving from place to place, hanging out by the pool. You don't wear no uniform. You're free, man."

Ritchie shook his head in disbelief. "You have got to be kidding me. I'm about as free as you are."

"No way, bro," Cheto said. He waved his hand at Ritchie as if to say: level with me. "What about the ladies?"

"What ladies are you talking about?"

Cheto sidled up closer to Ritchie. He glanced around conspiratorially, though there was no one anywhere around to listen in to—or care about—their conversation.

"The ladies, they look you up and down, bro. You know they do. You're a pool guy. They look at you they see muscles and water and..." Cheto wobbled his head from side to side thinking about it before his eyes lit up, "Clean! Yeah, clean is what they see in you. They look at Cheto and they see dirt and bugs and... fertilizer, man. They see this stupid jumpsuit, bro, but they don't ever notice what's inside. You know what I'm saying?"

"I don't think so," Ritchie told him.

"Ahh, man. You're just playing with me. C'mon now, bro, tell me straight 'cause I know it's true. Pool guys get more pussy than plumbers. Am I right?"

"Plumbers?" Ritchie asked. What the hell planet did this guy live on?

Cheto nodded his head vigorously. "Plumbers, you know. Plumbers clean their pipes, you clean their pools. Give them a little skim, right? Ha-ha! It's all v-e-e-e-r-y sexual. They can't help it."

"I don't think so," Ritchie said.

"Awww, you can be straight with Cheto, man. How much pool pussy you get into every week, bro? You do one of these rich bitches a day? Two?" Cheto smiled a sleazy smile and pointed down at the skimmer. "They look at that big pole and they come after yours. Am I right or am I right? Man, what I wouldn't give for a little pool pussy. Just once."

It was just too much for one day. Cheto, the fucking gardener. Ritchie did not need this.

"Listen, man, I hate to burst your crazy fantasy bubble, but I've been doing this shitty job for too many years and I have yet to have a lady, rich or otherwise, reach for my pole. You understand? You watch too much porn on cable, my friend."

Cheto firmly shook his head no. He just wasn't buying it.

"You telling me in all this time you never laid one of these rich bitch ladies? You know, rub in a little suntan oil here, a little something else wet there?"

Ritchie shook his head.

"Not even one little blow job from a horny gringa?"

"The only things I've ever gotten from this work are a rash from the chlorine, and a melanoma from too much time in the sun..." Ritchie disgustedly slammed shut the filter housing. "And a mountain of debts that I can't pay."

Ritchie collapsed the skimmer and picked up the empty jug of chlorine. He glanced up at the house, thinking about Mrs Hunt, who had indeed caught his attention in the past and truly was the stuff of bad movie fantasies. Except that Mrs Hunt had barely been able to contain her disgust at the sight of him the few times she had paid Ritchie his wages when her husband hadn't been around. There was as much chance of her ever sucking his tool as there was of Cheto winning the Nobel Prize. Even if they established one for manure shoveling.

"So my advice to you would be to continue in your current profession," Ritchie added.

"You must be doing something wrong, bro," Cheto told him, shaking his head. The smile had finally disappeared from his face and he studied Ritchie with something like pity.

"Tell me about it," Ritchie muttered.

And he went to stow his gear back in his pick-up before ringing the bell to collect his pay. Hell, maybe today would be the day that Mrs Hunt did see the man underneath the drudge who was the pool guy and invited him in to clean her filter.

"And there goes a flying pig," Ritchie said to himself.

With his work equipment put away, he walked around the truck and started toward the door of the big house. It was just then that he noticed something stuck to the windshield. He thought it was a palm frond at first then saw that it had printing on it.

It was a strip of newsprint and it hadn't landed on the window by accident; it had been carefully tucked underneath one of the wiper blades. But who could have put it there? Was it Cheto? Ritchie hadn't seen anyone else around the place and the truck had more or less been in his sight the whole time.

He walked over to pull the sheet of paper off the windshield. He was about to ball it up, then noticed that it was from the *LA Times*: a big chunk of the front page. The huge headline read: "*Savage Murder of Studio Boss Stuns Hollywood—Killer Sought.*"

What the...?

Ritchie was completely puzzled. Why would anyone put this on his car? Who would put this on his car? Was it Cheto? Another cheap shot at the order of things?

Ritchie turned around and took another look at the gardener, but Cheto was back to digging in his flower bed and wasn't paying Ritchie the slightest attention. He still looked a little bit crestfallen, actually. If Cheto had put the paper there, he must have had a reason for it. Was it some kind of joke? What was funny about this?

Ritchie glanced up at the house again, but there were no signs of life of any kind to be discerned from that quarter. Ritchie wondered if there was even anyone at home today. (And if not, how was he

going to collect the money he so desperately needed?) Anyway, why would someone from the house leave the newspaper there for him? It surely couldn't be the Hunts. The maid, maybe?

Ritchie glanced at the headline again. He was pretty sure that Mr Hunt worked in the movie business as an executive of some kind. Perhaps he knew the dead man. Or maybe someone left the newspaper on Ritchie's truck in the mistaken belief that it belonged to Mr Hunt.

Right, Ritchie, he thought. Get a grip. Like someone would think that the owner of this mansion drove a beat up pick-up with "The Pool Guy" written on the side.

Ritchie shook his head again. He decided it could only be Cheto who had done it and was going to confront him about what kind of game he was playing. He walked around the back of the truck again.

And smack into a man with a large gun in his hand.

"What the—?"

The man was white and almost exactly Ritchie's height. He had wavy, jet black hair and thick dark eyebrows that met in the middle. His narrow eyes were ebony black pellets buried deep in the sockets. His long thin nose was as sharp as the crease on just-pressed trousers. He had thin, pale lips and a dimple in the middle of his round chin. The man was dressed in a plain black business suit with a white Oxford shirt and a charcoal tie. Ritchie's eye was briefly drawn past the gun to the sight of the dark-haired man's gold tie clasp that was in the shape of a leering skull. The eyes of the skull were tiny red rubies, which glinted in the bright sunlight.

The man raised the barrel of the gun slightly and pointed it directly at Ritchie's heart. His thin lips stretched out into the cruelest of smiles.

"Wake up," the gunman said.

And he pulled the trigger.

The explosion was the loudest thing that Ritchie had ever heard in his life. It was also the last thing he ever heard.

Ritchie screamed in agony as the bullet tore through his ratty T-shirt.

Penetrated his thin and fragile skin.

Splintered the cartilage and bone of his ribcage, as if they were mere tissue paper.

Burst through and shattered to bits in the middle of Ritchie Almares's violently stilled heart.

TWO

"AAAAAAUUUUUUUGHHHHH!"

The scream went on and on. Louder and louder. It sounded as if it would never end.

It was impossible, one might have thought, for a mere human voice to express such ferocious pain, such unspeakable horror. How could tiny human lungs contain so much air? How could a tender larynx and soft palate not be torn to shreds by the strain of the terrible vibrations resonating through them? How could teeth, lips and tongue give form and shape and sustenance to an onslaught of such interminable agony?

And still the scream went on.

"Ritchie! Yo, Ritchie! Wake up, Ritchie, wake up!"

The scream finally came to an end.

But not the terror, not the pain beneath it.

"Ritchie!"

Ritchie Almares opened his eyes and shot bolt upright. He was breathing as hard as a marathon runner in his twenty-sixth mile.

No, you couldn't honestly call it breathing: Ritchie was wheezing, heaving, panting like small animal running for its life from some massive and ravenous predator. Desperate, terrified, running only on instinct and the indefatigable will to survive. He sucked in the air and expelled it just as quickly. His chest heaved with the effort. He was bathed in sweat from the very top of his crown to in-between his twitching toes. The sheets and blankets had been transformed into a salty, dank swamp of sweat.

Sheets.

Blankets.

My bed, Ritchie thought, as consciousness reigned inside of him like a pilot light. This is my bed.

Ritchie is in his bed. In his room. In his apartment in Palms.

Ritchie was alive. He was sweating, breathing, screaming. Alive. Thank merciful heavens, he was still alive.

"Holy shit," he whispered. "Holy fucking shit."

He looked up. Leonard was standing at the foot of his bed. Leonard Howard, his roommate, wearing only his trousers, his concave chest as ugly as ever. Leonard looked more than half-asleep himself. It was Leonard who had been yelling at him to wake up.

Leonard woke him up from that terrible dream.

Ritchie could have kissed Leonard for rousing him, for springing him from his terrible nightmare cage.

Leonard wouldn't much like that. Leonard wasn't even big on shaking hands.

Woke him from the dream. Jesus, Mary and Joseph. It was only a dream: Cheto the sleazy gardener, the newspaper on the windshield, the dark-haired man with the beady eyes and the gun.

The searing death that spiraled out of the barrel and burrowed and exploded inside Ritchie's chest. It had all been just a dream.

"Yo, Ritchie," Leonard said again. "What the hell, man? What was that all about?"

"I had a dream," Ritchie croaked.

"A dream?" Leonard said. He was holding up his too-loose trousers with one hand, pointing at Ritchie with the other. "You must have woke up the whole building, man. The whole damn neighborhood. That scream you let out. I never heard nothing like it in my life. Man, I thought there must be some wolf man or monster or something in here tearing you to bits. Shit, I almost didn't come in the door it sounded so scary. For a second there I was just going to go ahead and call the cops. A dream? What the hairy Jesus is happening inside your head, man?"

Ritchie ran his fingers through his tangled hair. They came out covered in an unpleasant film of grease and sweat. He wiped them off on his shorts. The shorts were wet, too. Ritchie felt lucky not to have pissed himself, the dream had felt so real. He shook his head, still trying to come to terms with the experience.

"A nightmare, Lenny. I... I never dreamed nothing like this before. Not even when I was a kid. This one was so real, I swear I can still see it in my head, still feel the... This guy, he shot me."

"You got shot?"

"Yeah. This dark-haired dude. In a... suit. Black suit. His eyes were just unbelievable. If I ever saw eyes like that on someone walking down the street at me, I would run to the other side to avoid him. The guy just out of the blue points this gun at me, and *BLAM*, he pulls the trigger. Shot me for no reason at all."

"You must have done something to him, man," Leonard said. "Or was it like a robbery or a mugging or something?"

"No, nothing like that at all," Ritchie said. He flopped back down onto the mattress and stared up at the ceiling. It all still felt so real to him. He couldn't shake that vision of the gunman's beady, black eyes, or the twist of his pale, thin lips. He saw the man's bony finger curl around the trigger and twitch with pleasure in the act of pulling it.

Ritchie would have sworn on a mile high stack of Bibles that he could still feel the hot lead of the bullet bursting into his chest, its fragmenting explosion tearing apart his beating heart.

"Oh, man," he said, closing his eyes.

"Listen, I've got to get into the shower, Ritchie," Leonard said. "I've got to be in work early today. You know that the store's running a big sale."

"Is it some holiday today?" Ritchie asked, still staring at the ceiling. "They're always making up new ones. Whose birthday is it today?"

"It's just Thursday, man. But like the big sign in the window says: Every Day's a Holiday at Computer Cosmos," Leonard said. "But I thought you knew that."

Leonard wandered back down the hall, closing the door behind him. A few seconds later Ritchie heard their crappy plumbing rumble and the sound of the shower coming on, followed by a little yelp from Leonard. The temperature control on their shower was a little unpredictable. Leonard's high-pitched yelp brought a broad smile to Ritchie's face, as it did every morning.

A minute ago he would have bet that he would never smile again.

Ritchie just lay there on the bed without moving for a while. He didn't want to, but he found that he couldn't help but replay the details of the dream over and over again in his head. Ritchie had experienced nightmares before—who hadn't?—and at one time in his life, a few years earlier, he had been plagued by them after he'd broken up with Irene. Or rather, she'd broken up with him. But those nightmares about Irene and her family, bad as they had been, were nothing compared to the dream he had just been through. Ritchie had never been one for remembering his dreams very well. He'd always listened in fascination at how other people were able to remember and talk about their dreams in exacting detail. Ritchie reckoned he would never be able to go and see a psychiatrist (not that he had ever wanted to) because they always asked about your dreams, but Ritchie never woke up with more than the most fleeting memory of his sleep fantasies. Or his nightmares.

But this one he found he could relive in every awful detail, from the too-white glint of Cheto's nasty smile to the searing agony of the bullet's assault on his body.

Thursday, Ritchie thought, trying to take his mind someplace else. It's Thursday today. What do I have to do on Thursday? I've got the Hunt pool to clean...

And, of course, the mere thought of that immediately brought it all back again. He could feel the pain in his chest start to throb. He idly rubbed the skin through his dirty T-shirt.

Leonard brushed his knuckles on the bedroom door and without waiting for a response, pushed it open and walked back into Ritchie's room. His hair was still wet, but he was now dressed in his usual black polyester trousers and blue button-down shirt with a white collar. Ritchie really hated those shirts—he couldn't bear wearing anything other than a T-shirt—but he never mentioned it to Leonard, who tended to be a little oversensitive. Leonard slipped a too-wide floral tie around his neck and went over to the mirror hanging above Ritchie's old chest of drawers to study himself as he knotted it.

"Are you feeling all right now, Ritchie?" he asked.

"Yeah," Ritchie said. "Yeah, I'm okay now. I just can't get the dream out of my head is all. A nightmare like that is pretty amazing."

Do you ever have them?"

"Not me," Leonard said. He had messed up the knot and was now retying his tie. "But I've got another one for you."

Something loosened in Ritchie's bowel. He sat up again on the bed and stared at Leonard's back. He had the terrible notion that Leonard was about to spin around with a gun in his hand, his eyes gone small and black, and shoot him in the heart.

Leonard merely finished knotting his tie. He didn't turn to look at Ritchie directly, but made eye contact by way of the mirror. Leonard was a bit of a chicken shit at heart.

"I'm not going to be able to cover your rent this month, Ritchie," Leonard told him in the mirror. "It's just a no can do. I'm short myself."

Ritchie was oddly relieved—no gun!—but he leapt off the bed anyway. He came up behind Leonard, who turned now to face him looking less sure of himself.

"I told you that I'll have the money for you, Leonard. Why are you hassling me?"

Ritchie did his best to avoid eye contact with Leonard. However, Leonard was determined and drew nearer.

"You said that you would have all the money for me last month, too, Ritchie. I know that things are tough at the moment, but I can only carry you so far. I mean, how much money do you think I make? I have a crappy job, too."

"Shit!" Ritchie said. He slapped a fist into his other hand. "You know I'm good for it, Leonard. You know I got this gig in Brentwood. The Hunt place, I told you about it. Big house, big pool. Hell, I was even talking to them about letting me do the hot tub, too. You know that's bigger money. I could be a hot tub guy by this time next month. I'm heading up there to work today. The Hunts always pay in cash."

Ritchie knew he was stretching the truth just a little. He had casually mentioned to Mr Hunt that he could look after their Jacuzzi as well as the pool and the man had sort of nodded at Ritchie in reply, but the possibility hadn't gone anywhere beyond that.

Just mentioning the Hunts, however, brought the nightmare flooding back into Ritchie's mind. The vision of that gun filled his head again and he heard the bang as the bullet left the chamber and

"Shit," Ritchie said.

"What?" Leonard asked.

"I cannot shake that nightmare off, Lenny. Damn. It just did not feel like any kind of dream. You know I can still feel it, too. I can feel how that bullet hit me in the chest. The pain is like still there, man. I think it's the most intense thing I ever felt. It just ain't like... It's incredible."

Ritchie stepped away from Leonard. Sweat was pouring out of him again at the mere memory of the dream experience. Ritchie pulled off his T-shirt and threw it onto the mountain of dirty laundry in the corner of the bedroom.

"Holy m-mother..." Leonard stammered

"What?" Ritchie replied.

Leonard was staring at Ritchie wide-eyed, his jaw hanging open.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man?" Ritchie demanded.

Leonard shook his head. He couldn't seem to speak. He just raised his right hand and pointed at Ritchie's chest with one quivering finger.

"Huh?" Ritchie said

He looked down.

Ritchie fell to the floor. He didn't even realize he had gone down. He slowly, slowly raised his hand and touched his chest with his finger.

A scar. A raw, red scar. Slightly moist and in the middle of his chest.

The kind of scar that might have been made by a gunshot.

"Oh my god," Ritchie whimpered.

He touched the scar with his fingertip. It was soft and slightly wet to the touch. It didn't hurt, exactly, but it felt sensitive. The wound responded to his prod like a lover's soft lips.

The scar sat right over his heart. In the precise spot, he realized, where the dark-haired gunman had shot him in his dream.

Ritchie gingerly took his finger away and held it up to show to Leonard, who kept backing away until he came up against the wall of his bedroom. His feet continued to move, but there was no place left to which he could retreat. He was shaking his head and staring at Ritchie with a look of utter disbelief. And fear.

"Leonard?" Ritchie begged.

"You sure it was just a dream, man?" Leonard asked. "Are you sure it was just a dream?"

THREE

The free clinic near the intersection of Pico and Sepulveda was packed to the rafters as usual. As ever, there was a preponderance of withered old people and young mothers with screaming babies sitting around, but also a surprisingly broad array of Angelinos from across the age, race and cultural strata. Ritchie saw African-American gang-bangers in their colors and a tidy Korean family reading from their Bible. There was a leather-clad biker with a patch over one eye, and an Aryan surfer dude who looked like he'd just walked in off the beach at Point Dume.

Every chair and bench in the place was taken and there were old Latino ladies sitting on the floor waiting their turn to be seen by one of the medical staff. Many of them would be examined initially by a nurse, but Ritchie never put up with that kind of treatment. He had been coming to the clinic for years, and he always made a fuss when they tried to foist him off with a mere nurse. Just because he couldn't afford health insurance, it didn't mean that he shouldn't be seen by a doctor when he needed to be. At least, that was always Ritchie's position and he made it very clear to all concerned. Because the truth of the world was that if you made a big enough stink—complained loudly enough, behaved stubbornly enough, gave people enough grief—they always gave in because it was easier for them in the end. The staff at reception knew Ritchie well enough by now that they didn't even try to send him to the nurse first. But he still had to wait his turn, and wait and wait, before he could see the doctor.

"Rosoff," Ritchie had demanded when he checked in at the reception desk. "I want to see Doctor Rosoff. And don't try to stick me with nobody else."

The receptionist nodded wearily, knowing better than to get into an argument with him. She remembered the fuss Ritchie had made the last time he was in. She gestured at the waiting area, indicating that he should take a seat. Ritchie saw that there was a tiny sliver of space on a bench between an eighteen year-old Latina juggling three kids and a middle-aged African-American man with his arm. in a

sling. He wedged his way between them—he wasn't about to sit on the floor—garnering a pair of dirty looks and a pained grunt from the man with the sling, but no more significant protest. The Latina woman's oldest child, who looked about four, tried hard to engage Ritchie in a game of peek-a-boo, but he was too self-absorbed in his problems to play along. That earned him another sneer from the little girl's harried mother.

Fuck it, Ritchie thought.

Truth be told, Ritchie didn't much care for children. But then he didn't much care for any of the types he had to share bench space with. Ritchie had long lists of people and things he didn't like. Not that anyone was asking.

As Ritchie sat there on that hard wooden bench, among the coughing, sneezing, broken-boned detritus of the uninsured, he couldn't help but rub at the mysterious scar on his chest through the thin material of his white T-shirt. The scar had started to fade almost as soon he noticed it, but it was still there. The moistness, the *freshness* of it had dissipated, but the exposed folds of skin had consequently started to go hard and crusty and it itched liked a son-of-a-bitch. He tried his best not to scratch, but like a missing filling or toothache that your tongue can't help but find and irritate, he couldn't resist the urge to scratch the bizarre wound. And every time he scratched at the scar, or found himself fingering it under his shirt, the whole awful episode of the dream came back to him with a remarkably vivid sense of reality.

He could see those beady black eyes of the darkhaired man boring into him, his glare burrowing into Ritchie's soul much as the bullet had dug its way into his heart. He could taste all over again the terror that he'd swallowed down as the gunman squeezed the trigger and discharged his deadly load of lead into Ritchie's heart.

He could feel, almost as if it was happening again then and there, the eruption of pain in his chest as the bullet carried out its fatal work.

Ritchie found himself shivering slightly in that warm clinic waiting room, and the sweat started to pour out of him afresh.

Must be that I've got some kind of bug, he thought. Maybe some weird new kind of flu from China or something, and the mark on my chest is just some crazy symptom that the doctor will know.

After all, it couldn't really be a gunshot scar, now could it?

Could it?

If nothing else, Ritchie's shakes and sweat encouraged his neighbors to increase their distance from him. The mom and kids got up altogether and moved away. Ritchie took advantage of it to spread out a little on the bench. A few hardy invalids tried to use Ritchie's own ploy on him and made an effort to squeeze in next to him, but none succeeded. The hard look on Ritchie's face and his wretched-looking condition were enough to scare them away.

After what seemed like an eternity, Ritchie's name was finally called over the crackly loudspeaker and he was directed to an examination room. Once inside, he was told to remove his shirt and wait for the doctor. He started to do so as the attendant left the room then decided that he would prefer to leave his shirt on for the moment. Much as he couldn't resist scratching at the itchy wound, Ritchie realized that he didn't want to sit there and have to look at it the whole time. He would wait until Dr Rosoff arrived and take his shirt off only when he really had to.

Another long wait ensued in the examination room. Ritchie sat on the exam table for a while, but his impatience grew. He got up and paced around the perimeter of the room, reading the dull charts and posters on the walls about measles vaccines and sexually transmitted diseases and the amazing advantages of breast feeding. That one made Ritchie snigger as he read it twice: he was all in favor of breast feeding whenever possible. Heh heh.

Ritchie was re-reading the detailed instructions over the sink on the proper way for medical professionals to wash their hands, when the exam room door flew open and Rosoff came in. She didn't look up, but continued to read a chart in her hand as she walked. She was carrying a whole stack of them under her arm. Her stethoscope was draped around her neck like a boa and she wore black denim jeans and a plain, pale yellow blouse under her stained white lab coat.

Rosoff wasn't an unattractive woman, though with her dark brown hair pulled back tightly in a bun she looked more than a little severe. Probably on purpose, Ritchie guessed, to keep the patients at a distance. He tried to imagine how she might look after hours and he suspected that with her hair down, a little make-up on and a blouse with two buttons undone, Rosoff wouldn't look halfbad. She could certainly breast feed Ritchie from that ample chest of hers any old day. Ritchie reckoned that Rosoff was about his age, thirty-seven, which for some reason always made him a little bit angry. He knew it was foolish and irrational, but the fact that a contemporary of his could be so much better off than he was—so much smarter, richer, capable, professional—just plain cheersed him off. Deep down he knew that the feeling was all about him and had nothing to do with the doctor herself, but it still bristled at something inside of him.

Even so, Ritchie had come to sort-of like Dr Rosoff. The first time she'd come through the door to examine him he had demanded to see a different doctor because he didn't like the idea of being examined by a woman. But that complaint had fallen on deaf ears. He was told, in no uncertain terms, that he could see the doctor assigned to him or he could walk out the door. Ritchie had been so sick with the flu that day that he couldn't say no and so Dr Rosoff it was. As it turned out, he decided that women doctors were okay; after all, they were a little easier to talk to than men about some things. That was why, today, he'd been so insistent that he could only be examined by Dr Rosoff.

"Ritchie," Dr Rosoff said, still reading the chart. "Long time no see. Always a good thing in a patient."

"Heya, Doc," Ritchie replied.

Doctor Rosoff offered him the briefest of smiles then flipped through the pages on the chart. She tossed the rest of her paperwork down on a stool and gestured for Ritchie to take a seat on the examination table. Surprised by his own high level of anxiety he climbed aboard, dangling his legs over the edge.

"So, how have you been, Ritchie? I knew it had been a while and I see from your records that you never showed up for your last appointment."

"I've been okay, Doc. I mean until today. I... I didn't think I needed that other appointment. At the time, you know?" Ritchie nervously licked his lips and drummed his fingers on the hard padding of the table.

"Uh-huh," Rosoff said. "So what happened today then? What brings you here?"

Ritchie realized that he didn't know where even to begin. The entire experience was so crazy, so weird. How could he explain what had happened in his dream, how terrifying it was, to this stern looking doctor standing in front of him with a million other patients —old ladies and kids, for Chrissake—demanding her more immediate attention?

"Ritchie?" Rosoff said, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

"It's..."

"I haven't got all day, Ritchie. You know what it's like here."

Ritchie nodded in reply, then shook his head and finally, in exasperation, lifted up his T-shirt.

"Here," he said. He pointed a finger at the scar above his heart.

Doctor Rosoff leaned in to take a closer look. She gently prodded the skin around the scar, then turned and pulled a pair of rubber surgical gloves out of a box hanging on the wall. She carefully slipped them on and walked back over to Ritchie who was still sitting there holding his shirt up.

"Why don't you take that shirt right off?" the doctor said.

Ritchie slipped the T-shirt off over his head.

Doctor Rosoff ran a gloved finger along the inside edge of the scar. It wasn't itching so badly now, but it still felt slightly raw as she poked at the loose flaps of skin. In Ritchie's mind's eye he saw the dark-haired man with the beady eyes standing in front of him. As Rosoff pressed a little bit harder against the center of the scar, Ritchie could have sworn he felt the bullet once more penetrating his chest. He flinched and let out a little grunt.

"Is that very sore?" the doctor asked.

"It's a little sensitive, yeah," Ritchie told her. "It's crazy, huh?"

Doctor Rosoff stepped back and looked Ritchie in the eye.

"How did you get the scar, Ritchie?" she asked.

"That's what I mean," Ritchie said. "It's totally crazy."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I just woke up this morning and it was there."

Rosoff did a double-take.

"I'm sorry?" she said.

"It was worse this morning, though. First thing, I mean. It was kind of... weepy I guess you'd call it. And it was a lot redder too. Kind of wet, you know? Like it was fresher or something."

"What happened to you in the night, Ritchie?" the doctor asked.

"Nothing! Well, I mean nothing really. I had this dream, see?"

Doctor Rosoff picked her papers up off the stool and tossed them onto the counter by the sink. She dragged the wheeled stool over and sat down on it, taking a good measure of her patient.

"You had a dream," she said.

"It's crazy, I know. I can hardly believe it myself."

"I'm just not following you here, Ritchie. You're going to have to make a little bit more sense."

Ritchie shook his head. "That's just it, don't you see? It doesn't make no sense at all. I mean it was just a dream, right? And they don't always make sense, I know that. But I dreamed that someone shot me, you know? Right here." He pointed to the scar on his chest. "And in the dream it was so real, it was just like it was really happening. It hurt like a sonofa... It really hurt. And I could feel myself dying, you know? I could feel that my heart stopped beating. And I started to scream and my roommate, Leonard, he... Well, it don't matter about Leonard. But he had to come and wake me up out of it I was screaming so loud, and when I woke up in my bed, I had this."

Ritchie ran his finger along the scar again.

Doctor Rosoff slid the stool back and slipped the gloves off her hands with a pop. "Look, Ritchie, if you don't want to tell me where you got this injury that's up to you, but—"

"I just did tell you!" Ritchie shouted. The doctor eased her stool back another foot. "I dreamed that someone shot me, right? A man with dark hair and nasty, tiny black eyes. He had a big gun and he

pointed it at my chest and he pulled the trigger and when I woke up..."

"You had this," Rosoff said.

She sounded doubtful. Who could blame her? Ritchie knew how loco it sounded.

"I knew it," Ritchie exclaimed. He slapped his hand against the table with considerable force. The tissue paper sanitary sheet tore and fluttered to the floor. Doctor Rosoff watched it fall then flicked her eyes back to Ritchie. He was staring down at the floor and said: "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

Ritchie started fiddling with the scar again. It was itching like crazy now, starting to feel sore again.

"Calm down, Ritchie," Doctor Rosoff said. She pulled her stool back closer to Ritchie and rested a calming hand on his knee. "Do you remember the last time you were here? Before the appointment that you skipped?"

Ritchie nodded his head. He felt a nervousness in his stomach, though, suddenly as distressing as the itching of the scar on his chest. He started to sweat again, too.

"Do you remember what we talked about then?" Rosoff asked him.

"That was when I hurt my hand."

"Yes," the doctor said. "You put your hand through a plate glass window, remember? You cut yourself quite badly."

Ritchie involuntarily shuddered. He was feeling very cold now without his shirt, but he made no move to put it back on. He wrapped his arms around his chest, covering up the scar there but displaying for the doctor the vestiges of the scars on the back of his right hand and wrist.

"And you were experiencing a number of other difficulties at the time as well. Insomnia, loss of appetite, you reported some depression...."

"It was at the Eumenide place," Ritchie said, staring off into nothing. "They had that pool house out in back. I was reaching back with the skimmer and I busted right through the window of the little house. Mrs Eumenide was inside changing at the time. She said I

gave her a real scare. Cut my hand up bad, but she didn't even notice that. I finished the job off, though, and then I came over here."

"Ritchie?" Doctor Rosoff said. He gave a little shake of the head and came back to the present moment. "You complained of feeling depressed. I just looked over my notes from that appointment and you told me you were in some despair at the time."

"I remember that," Ritchie said. "Just some rough times. It's been a tough couple of years. You know, the economy and all. Even rich people been cutting back."

"I understand that. At the time, we talked about the possibility of you going to see a therapist. A psychiatrist maybe. You were supposed to come back for an evaluation appointment with our counselor here. But that was the appointment that you never showed up for. That was six months ago."

Ritchie was shaking his head. "I don't need a shrink. What would be the point, anyway? I know exactly what a shrink would say to me."

"And what would that be?" Doctor Rosoff asked.

Ritchie snorted in reply.

"Ritchie?"

"I'll tell you what he'd say. He'd say: 'Ritchie, you are a thirty-seven year-old pool guy with no home, no wife, no kids and no life worth mentioning. You live in a ratty little apartment with a dickhead of a roommate you can't stand because you can't even afford your own goddamn apartment. You are depressed, my friend, and you have got every right to be depressed. Because you, Ritchie Almares, are a big time loser.' That's exactly what he would say."

"That is definitely not how it works, Ritchie, Therapy is not like that at all. It can be an extremely useful tool to—"

"Not be a loser?" Ritchie asked.

"Do you think you maybe have some self-esteem issues, Ritchie?" Doctor Rosoff asked.

"I got plenty of self-esteem," Ritchie told her. "For a loser."

A silence ensued between them. Ritchie began idly playing with the scar on his chest again. It was suddenly itching like mad.

"Are you telling me the truth, Ritchie?" the doctor asked.

"What? About being a loser? You bet your ass. You look in the dictionary under loser, you see my picture."

"No, Ritchie," Rosoff intoned. "I'm referring to the scar. Are you telling me the truth about that? How did you really get that injury? It looks at least two months old to me and if not for the location, I'd swear it was a bullet wound."

Ritchie leaned forward. "What do you mean there about the location? Why couldn't it be a bullet wound in that location?"

"Because no one could receive a bullet wound in that spot and live to tell about it. If that was a scar from a gunshot wound, the bullet would have blown your heart to little wet bits. And while I haven't actually listened to your chest today, since you're sitting here talking to me, I have to assume that your heart is still beating in there."

Ritchie reached up and covered over the scar with the palm of his hand. He rubbed it up and down then took his hand away. He looked down.

"Still there," he said softly. He looked back up at the doctor. "But I promise you that this scar was not there when I went to bed last night. I swear to you, Doctor Rosoff. It wasn't there last night. Not before I had that dream."

Doctor Rosoff shook her head, scratched it then threw her hands in the air. She leaned forward and took another look at the scar. Ritchie felt a burning sensation in his chest every time she touched him and had to work hard not to let the pain show. Rosoff sat back once again and let out a long breath.

"I have read of instances where extreme stress can cause certain... psychosomatic reactions."

"What does that mean?" Ritchie asked.

"Psychosomatic. From the mind. Rare occurrences such as... Oh, stigmata is an extreme example. I'm talking about physiological manifestations of psychological disturbances. Things in the mind made real. I've never seen such a thing in my entire career, though. And I thought I'd seen it all at this clinic."

Ritchie felt deflated. He scratched at the scar yet again and visibly shuddered. The doctor didn't miss it.

"So you're telling me that I am nuts," Ritchie said. "What do I need a psychiatrist for when I got you, Doc? Diagnosis complete. Rubber room this way."

Doctor Rosoff dropped her weary head into her hands. She pulled at her cheeks with her fingertips. Then she looked up at Ritchie and said, "Let's tackle this from another angle. You say you had a dream last night in which you were shot and when you woke up you had this scar."

"That's exactly what happened," Ritchie affirmed.

"Then let's see if we can't analyze this more carefully and systematically. Let's try and take it apart a little bit. The man in your dream, the one who you say shot you. How was it that you described him?"

Ritchie shuddered again. "Cold. He had really dark hair, black like the night, and wavy. And eyes just the same: black, I mean. They were the tiniest, death-like eyes you've ever seen. They weren't human eyes."

"Okay," Rosoff said. "This dark-haired man. Did you recognize him? Was it someone that you know or have met before?"

Ritchie thought about it. He had been so terrified by the dream, and its aftermath, that he realized he hadn't much thought about who the man was until now. His face had been so awful, but...

"You know," Ritchie said, closing his eyes, "I'm not sure. I don't think I know him, exactly, but now that I think about it, there was something familiar about him. Distorted like, but familiar."

"Dreams always distort the familiar, don't they?" Rosoff asked.

"I guess so. But I can't think for sure who he might be. It's like on the tip of my tongue now, you know, like the answer to a sports trivia question. I know it, but I don't." Ritchie opened his eyes and shook his head. "No, I can't figure it out. Anyway, who would want to kill me? I'm just pool guy, you know? What have I ever done? Put too much chlorine in the water?"

Doctor Rosoff studied him, but couldn't provide any answer to his question. She glanced at her watch. Ritchie realized she'd been in with him for a very long time on this busy day.

"Ritchie," she finally said. "Would it be all right with you if I asked one of my colleagues to help out with this? Get some additional input on what might be going on here?"

Ritchie shrugged. "I don't mind. I need all the help I can get about now. Bring 'em on."

"I'll just be a minute then," Rosoff told him. "He's just down the hall and if he's not in with a patient, I'll have him come in. Just wait here."

Rosoff pushed the stool back into the corner and walked out of the examination room. Ritchie took advantage of the moment to slip his shirt back on. He still felt a chill, but having his chest covered left him feeling less exposed and vulnerable. He sat back down.

He waited.

Doctor Rosoff didn't return.

So he waited some more.

Ritchie started to grow impatient. He began pacing around the edges of the room again. He was about to take yet another lesson on hand washing techniques when he noticed his file still sitting on top of the counter where Doctor Rosoff had left it. He glanced at the door, then at the clock on the wall. Feeling only slightly guilty, he flipped open the file and started to read.

The doctor's handwriting was typically hard to make out and he had a difficult time negotiating his way through her tiny italic scrawl. The notes on the top page were from his previous appointment six months earlier. Some of it was the standard recording of his complaints and the various data which had been collected about his height, weight, urine, blood pressure and so on. But there was a section for the doctor's comments at the bottom of the page and though this was even harder to decipher, the notes made Ritchie's heart start to race. Ritchie began to read:

Patient is at extreme risk for clinical depression. Possible bipolar? Family history! Definite risk to self, possibly to others? Severe anger management issues related to stress and yet origin to be ascertained. Recommended for...

The door to the exam room opened behind him and Ritchie quickly closed the file and tossed it back on the pile where he had found it.

He'd only managed to take one step back in the direction of the exam table when Doctor Rosoff came through the door. She was speaking to someone Ritchie couldn't see behind her.

"Ah, sorry to be so long. The doctor was in with a patient and then I got called away to answer the phone. In any event, I want to introduce you to an associate of mine from the clinic. I've given him a brief rundown of the situation, Ritchie, and I believe that he can help you out with some of your problems. I think he knows exactly what it is you are going through."

She stuck her head back out the door and said: "Come on in, now, he's ready for you."

Ritchie took a step forward and started to raise his arm to shake hands with the new doctor.

He threw himself backwards, staggering against the examination table and sending it flying over with a loud, metallic clatter.

The dark-haired man with the tiny black eyes entered the room. He was wearing a white lab coat like Doctor Rosoff, but his face was as cold and hard as the last time Ritchie had seen him in the dream. The dark-haired man drew his thin lips back in that death's head mockery of a smile. Ritchie knew that it was time to die.

"That's him!" he screeched.

He scrambled back to his feet, looking for some place to run. He was trapped in the corner of the examination room.

"Doctor Rosoff!" Ritchie pleaded. "That's him! That's the guy who shot me!"

Rosoff leaned over and whispered something in the ear of the dark-haired man. The man nodded and his awful smile grew broader across his pale, white face. He reached inside one of the big pockets of his white coat.

He drew out a gun; a hand-cannon. The same gun he had used to shoot Ritchie with next to the Hunts' pool.

He aimed the broad black barrel at a point in the middle of Ritchie's stomach.

"Wake up," the dark-haired man said.

He fired the gun, which exploded with the noise of a howitzer.

The bullet ripped apart Ritchie's guts. As he fell, he saw a ragged strand of intestine spill out from the gaping wound in his belly. He could smell his own feces bursting out through the newly-blown hole in his middle.

Ritchie screamed.

FOUR

It was, as the great prophet once said, déjà vu all over again.

The scream went on and on and on. And then, for good measure, it went on some more.

"Ritchie! Ritchie, dude, wake up. WAKE UP, DUDE!!"

Ritchie's eyes shot open. He can hear the screaming. It is so loud, so awful. Someone must be undergoing torture.

It's him. Ritchie is the one who is screaming. He realizes it.

He stops.

Where is he? What's happening? How did he get all wet?

Ritchie sat up in his bed. His roommate, Leonard, was standing in the doorway to the bedroom, a half-drunk bottle of Starbucks Frappuccino in his hand and a look of astonishment on his face. Leonard doesn't shock easily; most of the time he is too stoned to achieve a state as emotional as shock. He is usually too high to achieve a state of anything. Other than being stoned. Ritchie has never been able to figure out how Leonard managed to hold down a job. Of course, it was just as a script reader for one of the big film studios...

"Dude," Leonard said. "What be the haps, my man? Are you going to audition for *King Kong* or something? 'Cause that was, like, totally Fay Wray in execution."

"Shit, shit, shit," Ritchie croaked.

"I hear you, dude. But what was that shit?"

"A dream," Ritchie gasped. He looked cautiously around him. His room appeared to look exactly as it was supposed to. Everything was precisely in the lack of place it normally was. Leonard was stoned as he should be, even at—he glanced at the clock radio—eight-thirty in the morning. And all was right with the world.

But not with the inside of Ritchie Almara's sweat-soaked head.

"You had a dream, dude?" Leonard asked.

Ritchie threw off his thin cotton blanket. It, too, was so sweat-soaked he could practically have wrung it out and filled a glass. He

could have sworn that there were pools of sweat in the creases of his dirty sheets. Probably little crabs swimming around inside them too.

He got up and looked out the window. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the mustard-yellow smog was already crawling across the sky. Another archetypical Los Angeles day.

"I ain't never had a dream like that before," Ritchie said, suppressing a shudder. "It wasn't just a dream, man, it was one of those dream-within-a-dream things. Nightmare-within-a-nightmare, I guess you got to say. You think you've woken up from it only to find that it's still going on. Very scary."

"Awesome," Leonard said.

The dream was playing itself back now on the DVD inside of Ritchie's head. In widescreen and THX/DTS sound. There was probably a director's commentary available somewhere in there, too. And extras.

"First time around, right? I mean the first dream. I'm there cleaning the pool at that new client's house. That Hunt guy. You know, the guy who you said you knew?"

"Only by reputation, dude," Leonard said. "I mean it's a small town, you know?"

"Uh-huh," Ritchie said. "So I'm there working on the pool and I'm talking to the gardener, who's an asshole by the way. Kind of creepy."

"Ain't that always the way?" Leonard said nodding. He downed the rest of his Frappuccino in a swallow.

"Then I go to collect my money and this dude just shoots me. Out of nowhere. Just bang. Darkhaired son of a bitch with scary, black eyes."

"Was he, like, in a fight or something?" Leonard asked.

That derailed Ritchie's train of thought for a moment. Leonard had a shining talent for doing that to conversations.

"No, not that kind of black eye," Ritchie explained. "His eyes, the color of them, you know? His eyes were pitch black."

"Aww, that can't be good," Leonard told him.

Ritchie went on: "He just shoots me with this huge black gun, point blank. Straight through the heart. Blam!"

"Ouch, dude. That's gotta hurt."

"Oh, man, you have no idea. It really did hurt, too. I mean like I could really feel it happening, like I was dying. There was no sense of it just being a dream, you know? I screamed real loud and then I heard you calling my name, waking me up."

"Leonard, like, totally to the rescue," Leonard said, a great dopey smile spreading across his face.

"Uh-huh. So then I wake up, right? Only when I do, there's a big scar on my chest where the bullet went in. It's like still wet and fresh and gross."

Ritchie suddenly pulled down the collar of his T-shirt, tearing it slightly, in order to expose the area over his heart. He nervously glanced down.

No scar.

The skin is as smooth and whole as it has ever been. Nothing but his deep, dark suntan and the seeds of potential old age melanomas.

Ritchie breathed out a big sigh of relief and let go of his collar.

"Your head sure holds some freaky shit, dude," Leonard said.

Ritchie ignored him.

"There's more, though," he said. "That's not really the end of the dream, see? I only think it's the end. I think I'm all up and awake and just freaked out. And I've got this scar on my chest and it hurts so I go to the doctor. The free clinic on Sepulveda. I go to see Doctor Rosoff and she's examining me and all and she thinks I'm, like, nuts."

"Freaky shit, dude," Leonard repeated.

"And then suddenly the same guy shows up. The dark-haired guy with the gun."

"Let me guess!" Leonard yelled. He thought about it for a second, then said: "He shoots you again?"

Ritchie nodded. "This time in the belly. Oh, man does it ever hurt. I could see my guts spilling out. Could feel myself dying again."

"Gut shot is bad," Leonard said. "Remember *Reservoir Dogs*? Gut shot has got to be the worst."

"I don't know," Ritchie said. "I think the heart is worse. It sure was for me, anyway. I wouldn't recommend either, though."

"You're the man," Leonard admits.

"So then I was screaming again. Screaming from the pain and knowing that I was dying. Until you came along and woke me up out of it."

Leonard high-fived himself. "The dude is two-for-two," he said.

Ritchie just shook his head. He couldn't get over the experience he had just been through. Both of the dreams were so vivid, so real. No dream he had ever had in his life even came close to how these had affected him. Ritchie could swear that he could still feel the violation of the bullets in his flesh; could still hear the deafening report of the explosions that killed him—*twice*—still echoing in his ears.

"Anything like that ever happen to you, man?" Ritchie asked his roommate.

Leonard shook his head. "No. I never remember too much about my dreams, dude. I sleep the sleep of the just. And you know; Leonard strives to maintain very solid walls between his fantasy life and his real life."

Ritchie gave Leonard a look, but Leonard just stared down and nodded his head at the wisdom of his own lifestyle choice.

"Well, you're goddamned lucky then," Ritchie said. "I wish I could forget what happened to me this morning. Forget these awful dreams."

Ritchie stood there shaking his head, still feeling the horror of what he'd been through. Leonard shifted uncomfortably in the doorway.

"Uhh, dude?"

"Huh?" Ritchie said.

"I hate to bring this issue up at this particular juncture in time. Especially considering your, like, total upsetness over the dream and all, but—"

"What?" Ritchie demanded.

"You know that, like, the rent is about due again—time, huh? ain't it, like, a thing?—and I can't really cover your half this month."

"Oh, man! I told you I'd have the money this week and I'll have it. You know I got this new client and all. He's supposed to pay me today."

"It's cool, dude," Leonard said, holding up his hands. "Leonard is a no-hassle zone. I'm just, like, reminding you, okay? Leonard is just doing the things that Leonard has to do."

Ritchie shook his head as Leonard walked out of the room. He'd never entirely gotten used to Leonard's tendency to refer to himself in the third person. Ritchie flopped back down on the bed, staring up at the filthy ceiling.

I have got to do something about my life, he vowed for the millionth time that month. No wonder he suffered bad dreams living the way he did. Living with *who* he did. A change had to come and it had better come soon.

The dreams came back to him like a cheap pastrami burrito. Ritchie saw the face of the dark-haired man, heard the roar of the gun, felt the bullets in body...

Leonard poked his head back through the door.

"Dude?"

"What is it now, Leonard?"

"What time do you have to get to work today?"

"I told you, I'll have the money, man" Ritchie started.

"Nah, dude, that's not it. Leonard is most definitely cool. But, like, the cable guy is supposed to come this morning to install the upgrade, remember? You going to be here or should I tell the super to let him in?"

"What time is he supposed to come then?"

"Morning, dude, that's all they ever say. And they don't always mean it."

"Goddamn cable guys. Now that's the damn job to have. Who do you got to blow in this town to get one of those jobs, anyway?" He shook his head. Then he said: "I don't have to go out until around noon to get to the Hunt place on time. I'll let the super know if the guy hasn't come by then."

"Righteous!" Leonard said. "Later for you. And those dreams."

Ritchie heard him go out the front door. Leonard always slammed it.

The bang brought the dreams to the front of his mind again.

Ritchie went into the kitchen and made himself a big mug of coffee. He and Leonard kept their food separate, but while Leonard's cupboard was always fully stocked, Ritchie's was invariably as empty as Old Mother Hubbard's. Good thing he didn't have a dog. He had to swipe some instant—and some milk—from Leonard's stocks to make his breakfast.

As Ritchie drank Leonard's coffee, he couldn't stop himself from playing the dreams back in his head yet again. He ran a hand over the unbroken skin over his chest for reassurance. He scratched his stomach.

Scratched it again.

He had a terrible itch down there. Ritchie got to his feet and pulled up his T-shirt. He looked down.

He tumbled backwards over the kitchen chair, sending the coffee cup flying. It smashed against the cupboard.

A raw-red wound the size of his fist was spread out across the middle of his belly.

It was in the precise spot where the dark-haired man in Doctor Rosoff's office shot him.

"No—o—o—o," he whimpered.

The doorbell rang.

In a daze, Ritchie got up. He was running his hand over the now very sore wound stretching across the center of his stomach. He was in disbelief. This could not possibly be happening to him. *Again.*

Ritchie staggered out of the kitchen and down the hall toward the front door. He felt like he was in hell. He had to be. What other explanation could there be?

The doorbell rang again.

"Leonard?" Ritchie called out weakly. The pain in his stomach began to intensify. It was as if the bullet was still twisting around inside him, grinding up his guts.

Ritchie collapsed to his knees. The doorbell rang again.

He dragged himself down the hall to the front door. He reached up for the doorknob, using it to pull himself off the floor. Ritchie was in a state of shock. He didn't know what he was doing, running on pure adrenaline now.

He opened the door.

The dark-haired man was standing there, his wavy hair mostly covered by a white baseball cap with the legend: Century Cable. He wore gray coveralls and carried a heavy metal toolbox. His thin lips drew back slowly in that now murderously familiar grin.

Ritchie was frozen with naked terror. Nothing came out of his mouth, though urine dribbled out of his penis.

The dark-haired man opened the toolbox and drew out his big, black gun. He pointed the barrel. directly at Ritchie's balls. His skeletal grin grew broader.

"No. Please," Ritchie squeaked.

"Wake up," the gunman said.

He fired.

He screamed.

FIVE

"Rich, Ricardo. Ritchie. RICHARD!"

He woke up much faster this time, and more aware of his environment. He was still screaming as his eyes opened, but the screaming quickly stopped. The pain in his groin transcended all belief. Indeed, the word "pain" did not even begin to do justice to what he was feeling and was entirely inadequate to the situation.

The dark-haired man had shot Ritchie's balls right off.

There's something that doesn't happen everyday.

Ritchie scrambled to unravel himself from the bed covers, which had become tangled around his legs in the night.

"Shit, shit, shit," he cried as he angrily kicked the covers aside. He pulled at the drawstring on the red sweat pants he always wore to bed, and taking time to offer the briefest of silent prayers to whatever gods there might be, he looked down at himself.

A place for everything and everything in its place. His most precious equipment was intact. He reached inside his pants and felt around to further reassure himself. All was as it should be. Two balls, one pole, no waiting. No wounds, no scars, no bleeding. The pain had already begun to fade.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Richard," Leonard admonished. "Please do that on your own time. Unless you were planning to invite me to join in the fun."

"Whuh?" Ritchie gasped.

Ritchie hadn't even realized that Leonard was in his room. Then he remembered that it had been Leonard's voice that had called him, waking him up out of the nightmare. Leonard wore a slightly lascivious smirk as Ritchie continued to poke around his genitals. He quickly withdrew his hand. from inside his pants.

"That must have been some dream," Leonard said, wiggling his eyebrows. "Dreaming about anyone I know?"

Ritchie looked all around the room. Everything was where it should be. At least, he thought it was. But he had believed it was after he had awoken from the previous dream. Now, which one was that?

Oh, yeah: the clinic. Doctor Rosoff. The doctor who turned out to be the dark-haired man with the gun. But this time he turned out to be the cable guy. And he shot Ritchie right in the—

"Balls," he said out loud.

"I do beg your pardon, Richard?" Leonard asked. He still had that dumb smirk on his face. Ritchie hated that smirk. He hated the fact that he had to put up with a gay roommate. Ritchie wasn't really that tolerant a guy. Only desperation—and Leonard's considerable displays of understanding with regard to Ritchie's ever-precarious financial situation—kept him living in the flat with Leonard. Beggars can't be choosers, now can they?

Ritchie really hated it when Leonard camped it up. And when he called Ritchie "Richard." Only Ritchie's mother had ever called him Richard, and that was only when she was really mad at him. Ritchie didn't really know why he let Leonard get away with so much. He knew that Leonard knew that Ritchie hated it, too. Leonard, of course, thought it was all just a good laugh.

But Ritchie wasn't in any kind of laughing mood this morning.

"Knock it off, Leonard," Ritchie warned. He retied the string on his sweat pants and propped himself up against his pillows.

"Well, isn't that a fine thank you?" Leonard said. "Maybe next time I'll just let you keep on screaming until you die."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ritchie snapped, jumping up out of bed.

"You know what they say," Leonard told him, taken aback by the intensity and suddenness of Ritchie's fury. "If you die in your dream, you really die in your bed."

"Bullshit," Ritchie replied.

"It's just something they say."

"Then *they* don't know their ass from a hole in the ground," Ritchie muttered.

Leonard started to smirk again.

"That is one mistake I would never make," he said. "I promise you that."

Ritchie growled: "I'm not in the mood, Leonard"

"More's the pity. So what was this dream then?" Leonard asked. He'd backed up into the doorframe and was leaning against the jamb, hands folded behind his back and a foot propped against the frame for balance.

The horror of the dreams washed over Ritchie all over again. The gunman shooting him in the heart, in the gut, in the balls. Then waking up only to find it was a dream each time. He pulled up his shirt and carefully examined his stomach and chest.

No scars, no wounds. He was perfectly fine.

"Are you teasing me again, Richard?" Leonard quipped.

"Huh?" Ritchie asked, distracted. Then: "No. No! Don't be stupid, Leonard."

"Well, you can't blame a boy for trying."

"Do you have many dreams, Leonard?" Ritchie asked.

"Well, I always wanted to do *Cabaret*, of course. But then what boy doesn't? I could have been Liza if fate had just been that little bit kinder to me in my wasted youth. And, of course, there's my recurring dream about the round-the-world trip on a Greek freighter."

"Leonard..."

Leonard got serious. "Everybody has dreams, Rich. That's part of what makes us what we are and how we can understand ourselves. We all have things we have to face up to and don't want to face or can't bear to in our waking lives. All the little, and not so little, secrets and lies that we tell ourselves and that we tell each other. It all stays in your head, you know. No matter how hard you try you can't escape from yourself in the end. That's what dreams are for, if you ask me. That's where all those little nasties, not to mention the not so little nasties, come back to haunt you. To speak the unspeakable to you."

"You believe in all that psychological stuff?" Ritchie asked.

"Well, I'm no Freudian, if that's what you mean. Though I like the idea of those sofas. I was really into Jung for a while. But, of course, that's when I was much Jung-er."

Leonard laughed at his own dubious wit. The remark passed Ritchie by entirely and Leonard didn't push it.

"Are you especially worried about anything at the moment, Ritchie?" Leonard asked.

Ritchie looked up. Leonard only called him "Ritchie" when he was being very serious. He saw a look of honest concern on his roommate's face now and felt a flash of contrition for his generally shabby treatment of Leonard. He wasn't that bad a roommate, all things considered. For a homo and all.

"I've always got worries," Ritchie said. "Don't you?"

Leonard shrugged. "I can't spend my life worrying about my worries," he said. "I wouldn't ever have time for fun."

"Maybe you don't have so much to worry about as me," Ritchie said.

"Maybe. Or maybe I just handle my worries better. Did you ever go back and talk to that doctor about your problems? The one you saw about the insomnia?"

"Doctor Rosoff," Ritchie said. "I just went to see her and—"

Ritchie caught himself. He hadn't just been to the doctor. Or rather, he had, but only in his dream. Or one of his dreams. Or...

Ritchie started shaking his head then he pulled at his greasy hair.

"Ritchie?" Leonard said softly.

"I think I must be losing my mind, Leonard. Some seriously strange shit is happening to me here."

"I don't think I understand," Leonard said.

"I've been having these dreams. Like one after another. They just keep coming. And at the end of every one of these nightmares this awful dude with black hair and little black eyes shoots me someplace. And he kills me. He shot me in the heart the first time. Then in the stomach. This last dream, when I was screaming and you woke me up, he shot me right in the balls."

"Ouch," Leonard squealed.

"Ouch, you better goddamn believe it," Ritchie said. "I can still feel it. It's like it's all real to me every time, too. And then when I wake up, or I think I wake up, and I find out I'm just in another dream. And I'm here talking to you, like right now, and everything seems normal. And then... *Blam!* The dark-haired man comes back and shoots me again."

Ritchie buried his head in his hands. Leonard hesitated, then walked over next to Ritchie and patted his shoulder gently. Ritchie accepted the gentle comfort without carping.

"What am I going to do, man?" Ritchie cried.

"You've just got to get over it. It's just a dream, isn't it? And it is all over now. Splash some cold water on your face and get a grip," Leonard told him. Leonard glanced at the clock-radio on the desk. "I've got to get to work. Big sale day at the boutique. It's going to be crazy, I'm sure. What about you, are you working today?"

Ritchie lifted up his head and nodded. "I've got the pool at the Hunt place today. Remember? I told you, it's my new gig."

"You know the rent is coming due soon," Leonard hinted.

"I know. I'll have the money for you this month, don't worry," Ritchie said. He was too exhausted, too emotionally drained to even get stirred up by his roommate's reminder about his money problems. "This Hunt dude has to pay me today. He'll pay."

"It's just that... I can't cover you this month, Ritchie. I'm a little short myself. And there's still last month's phone bill, you know."

Ritchie just nodded. At the moment utility bills didn't stack up against his problems. What would happen to him when he tried to walk out the door? Would the dark-haired man be waiting for him in the hall? Would he be the mailman? Or the Super? Or maybe just some guy on the street walking his dog?

He could be anywhere. Everywhere.

Or nowhere at all. Ritchie tried to remind himself that it had all been just a dream. He was sitting in his bedroom, safe and sound as money in the bank. No wounds, no scars, no holes in his body. His heart was beating and his brain was working. The LA sun was shining.

And he also had real work yet to do that day.

"Mr Hunt will pay today," Ritchie said again. "Don't you worry."

Leonard offered Ritchie another comforting pat then headed off to get to work. Ritchie dragged himself out of the bedroom and into the shower. He was nervous just walking down the hall. He checked behind the shower curtain before turning on the taps. He caught

himself as he did it and shook his head at his paranoia. Then he went ahead and checked behind the curtain anyway.

How could he be sure any other way?

Ritchie showered quickly and dressed in his uniform of shorts, T-shirt and flip-flops. He checked that he had everything he needed for work in the back of his pick-up truck. He saw that he was low on chlorine and knew he should stop at the supply house and pick up some more before heading to the Hunt place. But who might he run into at the store? Might the dark-haired man be working behind the counter? Or be walking the aisles as another customer? Or—

"Stop it!" he yelled at himself.

He couldn't go on like this, otherwise he couldn't possibly continue to function. He was awake now and the dreams were over. He'd been awake for a good hour or more and everything was perfectly normal. He had no scars or gaping wounds, he wasn't in pain and there were no outward manifestations of the dream injuries that he had discovered when he had "woken up" previously.

Everything was just fine and Ritchie had work to do and rent to pay. It was time for him to get into the truck and head off for the Hunt place in Brentwood.

Ritchie had only taken three steps out the door when he ran back inside the apartment.

He dashed into the bathroom and rooted through the medicine chest. He couldn't find what he was looking for. Dashing into the kitchen, he had a sort through the drawers and cabinets, but it wasn't there, either. Then he remembered where he had left it.

Cautiously, Ritchie walked back outside and opened the passenger side door of the truck. He flipped open the glove compartment and pulled out a handful of greasy fast food wrappers. He threw them in the street and kicked them away. There, underneath a flashlight that hadn't worked in he couldn't remember how long, he found the little cardboard box he'd been looking for.

REVIVALOT, the label read in big red letters. And underneath: Stay Awake! Keep Alert! Next to that was a small cartoon drawing of a figure that looked like some wide-eyed, manga-esque depiction of Norman Bates in full, murderous fury.

Perfect, Ritchie thought!

There were six of the little tablets left in the childproof packaging. The instructions said to take one or two at any one time and no more than six in any twenty-four hour period.

Ritchie dry-swallowed all of them at one go.

"No fucking dreams today," he told himself. "Ritchie Almares is going to be Mr Wide Awake And Raring To Go from here on out."

He got behind the wheel and cranked the engine as the pick-up tore away from the curb with a ferocious banshee scream.

Ritchie approached the Hunt mansion with no small apprehension. His head was buzzing like a wasp's nest from the fistful of pills he'd swallowed, lending his fear an extra, turbo-charged caffeine edge. He could feel the sweat dripping down and pooling in the small of his back and had to peel himself off the car's cheap interior every now and again. He wiped his brow with the back of his hand then rubbed that off on the front of his T-shirt. Nervously pulling up to the gate of the mansion, he inserted his card-key into the slot of the automatic mechanism. Nothing happened for a minute and Ritchie started to reinsert the card, but then the big gates rolled slowly open with a squeak and Ritchie eased his way on up the drive.

He parked at the top of the driveway as he always did and set the emergency brake. Just as he had in his dream, he recalled. In the first dream of his Russian doll set of nightmares. Ritchie sat there behind the wheel for a while just looking around, taking in every bit of the estate that he could see. No need to rush into anything today.

All was quiet.

Cheto the gardener was nowhere to be seen. The big bed that he'd been working on in Ritchie's dream was overflowing with a rainbow fountain of big, bright flowers. The flora looked mature, as if they'd been growing there for some considerable time. There was nothing to suggest anyone had been digging in the bed anytime of late. No sign of anyone at all.

Ritchie nodded his head in approval.

He started to open the door to get out, when he thought better of it. He stopped, tugged at his collar and peered down inside his T-shirt. The flesh over his heart was still smooth and scar-free. So was the skin, ever so slightly going to flab, around his middle. No wounds had appeared. Everything was just right.

With a not-so-casual glance around, Ritchie reached down and jiggled his balls.

Cojones A-OK. He let out a deep breath.

"You are losing it, Ritchie," he said to himself as he got out of the truck.

He gathered his gear from the back of the pickup as he'd done a thousand times before on as many jobs. He grabbed his skimmer and his bottle of chlorine and his water-testing kit. As he turned to walk to the pool, he glanced up in the direction of the sun at the Hunts' big ranch house.

He stopped in his tracks.

Was there someone in the window? Someone watching him?

Ritchie dropped his gear and shielded his eyes from the sun with one hand. He squinted back at the house and the large bay window where he thought he'd seen a figure looking down on him.

No one was there now.

But there was something awfully familiar about that silhouette. In just that fleeting instant he was sure he knew something about who it was. It was a shape he recognized from...

His dreams?

A bucket load of terror took hold of him. He felt his legs start to buckle and his hands began to shake. He walked around the truck and took a few steps up onto the immaculately manicured lawn to get a better view of the house, out of the direct line of the bright afternoon sun.

Nope, no one there. The house looked to be deserted.

And what if there was someone? After all, why shouldn't there be someone in the house? Mr Hunt, or Mrs Hunt, or one of the domestics. There was no reason in the world why there should not be someone at home. And why shouldn't they be looking out their own window? Especially at a battered old pick-up truck that had just

cruised up the drive. And from whom, exactly, did he think he was going to collect the money he so desperately needed if there was no one at home?

He knew that he was being irrational now. It's those damned pills, he decided. What in the world was he thinking taking so many of them at once? Surely, that was more than enough to set his legs to quivering and his hands to shaking.

He'd just have to get to work and shake it all off. He was going to have to think a little bit more. A good rule in general, he considered.

Ritchie went back and picked up the skimmer and began to collect the floating scum off the top of the pool. It seemed especially filthy today, more so than he would expect. Perhaps the Hunts had held an outdoor party. Then Ritchie realized that there was something wrong. He cocked his head and listened to the chugging sound coming from the pool's big filter system.

That wasn't right. The Hunts had a top-of-the-line filter that was designed to make almost no noise at all. At worst, you should hear a pleasant. hum if the housing was left open. It shouldn't be *chug-chug-chugging* along like it was now. There must be something wrong.

Ritchie put the skimmer down and walked over to the filter. He released the stainless steel latch on the housing and flipped open the lid.

And screamed at what he saw.

A bloated, dead rat was caught in the filtration. system. Its quivering, waterlogged body had expanded to several times its normal size and it's horrible, eyes—beady, black eyes—bulged out of its head. The top of its skull had been ripped open, probably by the filter motor, and Ritchie could see the gray mash of its tiny brain splattered over its matted brown fur. One of the creature's legs had been torn off but the others stood stiffly out from the body in rigor mortis. Its tail, though well-chewed, had become ensnared in the workings of the filter. No wonder the pool was so filthy.

Despite the chlorinated water in which it was immersed, the stench of the creature's ugly death and subsequent decay filled

Ritchie's nose. He had to take several steps back and away from the pool to prevent himself from throwing up.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. He took a few deep breaths.

He had, he knew, slightly overreacted. Those damn pills, he told himself again. It wasn't the first time he had come across a dead animal in his years of cleaning pools and filters. He'd actually skimmed more than half a dozen dead cats out of pools over the years but nothing had ever given him a scare like this rat.

Those eyes, he thought, those little black eyes. Exactly like—

"No!" he shouted at himself. He was not going to go back down that terrible route again. Been there, done that, peed the pants. This had nothing to do with any of those goddamned dreams anyway. He'd found a dead rat in the swimming pool; that was all.

Was it nasty? Yes.

Was it unpleasant to clean up? You bet your ass.

But in the end, it was just a dead rat. A job to be dealt with. No one ever said a pool guy's lot was an easy one.

Ritchie stood there, trying to figure out how best to extract the rat from the filter without getting bits of it all over himself. The first thing was to turn the filter off and stop that horrible *chug-chug-chugging*. Then it was a question of how to get the rat out of the actual mechanism of the filter. Ritchie didn't want to use his skimmer to scoop it out he didn't think it was strong enough to do the job. Plus he'd have to throw away the skimmer. He didn't carry a shovel with him in the truck, but thought that even if there was no Cheto around, someone obviously spent a lot of time working on the Hunts' gardens. He walked back around through the beds until, sure enough, he found a small shovel stuck into a pile of compost. He pulled it out and carried it back to the pool.

With the filter turned off, the rat was no longer quivering. It didn't look so scary now, just a bit sad. Even the bulging black eyes evoked more pity in Ritchie than fear. Not a nice way to go, he thought. Not even for a rat.

Taking a deep breath of clean air first, Ritchie leaned over the filter housing and wedged the tip of the shovel under the dead rat. He

eased the handle back and forth slowly and carefully worked the rat free of the filter. He was a little worried that the body might break into pieces and wouldn't that be one hell of a mess to deal with? The tail was still immeshed in one of the gears, though, and in the end Ritchie had to grit his teeth and grab it between his fingers. He gave a sharp pull on the tail while still holding the rat's body up with the shovel. The tail tore right in half, a pinky-sized curl still lodged in the filter, but the rest of the rat was free. Ritchie eased the shovel out of the filter housing with the rat corpse still on board. It was his intention to carry it over to one of the garbage cans and dump the body. there, but he tripped over the skimmer he'd casually tossed poolside and twisted the shovel handle as he fell.

The rat went flying and landed on the pool's wooden deck with a liquid smack.

"Shit!" Ritchie yelled.

He threw the skimmer out of the way and went over to look at the rat. Miraculously, it was still in one piece and showed little sign of leakage. Maybe it's my lucky day after all, he thought.

Ritchie then noticed something very odd.

The rat had landed on its back. It had been face down inside the filter and Ritchie had only been able to see its head and matted fur. Now he could see the full underside of the creature.

There were two bullet holes in the rat; one about where its heart should be and the other round about its belly.

Ritchie's gaze turned to the rat's balls, or where he assumed a rat's balls should be. He used the shovel to prod it down below, but the creature's bottom half had been more seriously chewed by the filter and it was impossible to tell if any of the damage might have been the result of a gunshot.

Despite the warmth of the midday Angelino sun, Ritchie felt himself grow very cold. The pattern of the wounds, it had to be a coincidence, but—

"My husband shot it," a soft voice said.

Ritchie literally jumped two feet in the air.

"Sorry," the voice went on. "I didn't mean to startle you like that."

His heart desperately trying to flee from his chest, Ritchie turned around to the sight of Mrs Hunt standing on the deck behind him. Or not so much standing, as posing.

And what a pose it was.

The mistress of the house was a walking, breathing, three-D (and then some) promotion for sex in the city of Los Angeles.

Mrs Hunt—and Ritchie realized that he'd never heard her first name mentioned—couldn't have been more than a tick past twenty. Though something in her eyes suggested that she'd learned more than most at that age. Those eyes were as blue as Robert Johnson's soul and her lips as red as a raw piece of meat. Her straight, blonde hair hugged and caressed the curves of her creamy shoulders the way... well, in a way that would inspire rank jealousy in every straight man who laid eyes on her. Every inch of her five foot seven frame was bronzed satin, and pretty well every one of those inches was available for full viewing. Mrs Hunt wore a thong down below and, well, Ritchie had to admit he didn't know what you might call the garment that she almost wore up above. It was a wafer-thin fiber of silky pink that approximated a blindfold for her ample and meaty breasts. The areolas were definitely peeking out at the firing squad though. And fist-sized brown wonders they were, with long stiff nipples straining like baby noses against the brave strand of fabric that pretended to conceal them. The thong, living up to its invented purpose, left equally little to the imagination. Every curve, contour and outline of her body could be discerned through its clinging hold. Every inch of her below the chin—and it very clearly was every inch—was clean-shaven.

If you cut a cross-section through the middle of Mrs Hunt, and what a middle it was, each slice might as well bear the stamp: Viagra.

Her fingernails and toenails were painted bright pink, with little flecks of gold glitter brushed on top. Her elegant feet were wrapped inside a pair of silver, high-heeled ankle-strap wedgies and she held a highball glass in her dainty left hand. The glass was empty and from her slightly awkward movements and hint of slurred speech, Ritchie guessed that the clear liquid inside wasn't water. And it wasn't her first of the day.

"What are you going to do with it?" Mrs Hunt said.

Still staring at her chest, Ritchie was momentarily confused by the question. He knew what he'd like to do with it—what Cheto would most definitely have expected him to do with it—but he was at a loss for words.

"How's that?" he managed after a while.

Mrs Hunt smiled. She knew exactly what he had been looking at.

"The rat," she whispered. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Oh," Ritchie said, coming back to himself. "I'll, uh..."

What the hell was he going to do with it? He couldn't just toss it into the garbage can as he had intended with Mrs Hunt watching. He'd have to dispose of it some other way.

"My husband shot it," she said again.

"Yeah?"

"He's good at getting rid of anything he doesn't like. And he likes to think that he's top rat around here."

"Don't you mean top dog?" Ritchie said.

Mrs Hunt shrugged her shoulders and her fabric floss of a top slipped even further down her tits. One entire nipple was now fully exposed to Ritchie's view. It seemed to swell and harden as he watched.

"You say dog, I say rat. Shall we just call the whole thing off?"

"What thing would that be?" Ritchie asked, playing along.

"What thing have you got?" Mrs Hunt shot back.

It was getting very hot out by the old swimming hole.

"Tell me... uhhh... Mitch is it?"

"Ritchie," he said. "My name is Ritchie."

"That's cute," Mrs Hunt said, dazzling him with a smile. "What do you think of Mr Hunt?"

"Huh?" he replied.

"Mr Hunt? My husband? The man who pays your salary? What do you think of him?"

Ritchie didn't really think much of anything about him, and certainly didn't care to think about him at this particular moment in time.

"He's a nice man," he offered.

"He's a rat," Mrs Hunt spat. "Right down to his beady little rat eyes. At least, he is when he's around. Which is none too often."

"I see," Ritchie said.

"Do you?" Mrs Hunt very deliberately turned to her left and slowly bent over to pick a stray leaf off the wooden deck. The thong left absolutely nothing to the imagination. At least, not to Ritchie's imagination. She straightened up again and held the leaf out to Ritchie.

"I think you missed this one," she said.

"Uhh, thanks," he said, taking it from her fingers.

Mrs Hunt grasped hold of his outstretched hand and said: "Tell me something, Ritchie. Are you married?"

"No," he said.

"Involved?"

"Uh-uh."

"You're not queer, are you?" she challenged.

"Hell no!" he said.

"That's good. That's *very* good."

Ritchie glanced around him. He wasn't sure how to handle this situation. Even in his dream he hadn't been lying to Cheto. Not once in all his years as a pool guy had a woman propositioned him in the line of duty, as it were. Much less a woman who looked like Mrs Hunt. He couldn't quite believe that this was happening even now.

If that's what *was* happening.

"I, uhh, better get back to work," he said, still unsure of himself. "The rat—"

"My husband is away, I told you," she said. And let out a clearly drunken laugh.

He tried to step around Mrs Hunt, but she blocked his way.

"Aren't you a little old to be a pool guy?" she asked.

"It's just a job, you know? Everybody's got to make a living. Look, Mrs Hunt, I got work to do. and—"

"Oh my God," she said, covering her hand with her mouth. "I've offended you. Oh God! I'm so sorry. It's not me, really, it isn't. I've had a few drinks this morning, though. Just a little eyeopener. I get

so bored wandering around this big old house all on my own and you know that the gin goes straight to my head."

"It's okay," Ritchie said, holding up his hands. "No offense taken. Really. I'm cool."

"It's just... My husband can be such a bastard sometimes. If you were married you would understand, Mitchy. It's such a thin line between love and hate."

She let out a little sob. The top of her bathing suit fell away entirely as she cried. She was, indeed, a fantasy in the flesh.

Nevertheless, Ritchie was feeling distinctly uncomfortable now. Maybe the Chetos of this world, if they existed, could and would capitalize on a situation like this. And maybe on another day, a day that hadn't started out so totally weird what with the killer dreams and all, even Ritchie might have responded more aggressively and taken the plunge into Mrs Hunt's pool. But between the dreams and the Revivalot buzzing through his system, he just wanted to finish his job and collect his money.

"Listen, Mrs Hunt, maybe... Maybe you ought to lie down for a while."

Her sobbing magically stopped. "Is that a proposition, Mr Pool Guy?" she purred.

"No, no. That's not what I meant..."

"Jesus Christ!" Mrs Hunt spat. "This is just my kind of luck; the only pool guy in the city of LA who plays hard to get."

And with that she lunged at Ritchie, literally falling onto him. He had no choice but to catch her and hold her up in his arms. He could feel the heat of her huge breasts pressing against his sweaty chest as she pressed her lips to his neck, his chin. She stood on tiptoes and crushed her mouth against his, thrusting her tongue past his lips and running her hands down to his ass. She was surprisingly strong and pulled him tightly against her.

Ritchie accepted her devotions passively at first, then thought to himself: what the hell? He started to return her kisses with equal and then more intense ardor and pulled her into him. He reached down and gave her tight, juicy ass a hard squeeze and she yelped with delight at his touch. She broke up the kiss and leaned back slightly.

She reached up and cupped her massive tits in her hands, offering them up to Ritchie for a thorough oral inspection.

"That's my wife, asshole!" a voice boomed from behind.

Ritchie let go of Mrs Hunt—*what the hell was her first name?*—who literally fell on her wonderful ass. She let out an almost comical "oooof" as she landed. Ritchie spun around.

And stared into the face of the dark-haired man from his dreams.

"IT'S YOU!" he screamed.

Ritchie felt reality grind to a screeching halt around him. The whole world seemed to freeze and grow silent as the face of the dark-haired man filled Ritchie's vision. He looked much as he had in the first of Ritchie's dreams-within-a-dream, dressed in a black suit with a white shirt and charcoal tie. But unlike in his dream, the cut of the suit was clearly bespoke and massively expensive and the tie was the kind of designer gear that cost more than a pool guy earned in a week. That wavy, black-as-a-raven hair seemed to flow off the top of the man's head like waves crashing against the shore of Ritchie's shattered consciousness. His tiny black eyes were purgatorial holes in the very fabric of the universe through which Ritchie thought he would be sucked into and left to float forever in some tortured limbo of non-existence.

Of course the dark-haired man was Mr Hunt. Of course. Somewhere, buried deep inside his confused awareness, Ritchie had known that Hunt was the dark-haired man. He had known it—without being able to put his finger on it—in the dream when Doctor Rosoff asked him if he knew the identity of his murderous assailant. He had said no in the dream, but knew there was something familiar about the man. How could he have not realized who it was? How could he have forgotten that the dark-haired man was Mr Hunt?

Why was the dark-haired man actually Mr Hunt?

Ritchie still didn't know the answer to that question. But he did know that he was deathly afraid to find out.

"Wake up," Ritchie said to himself, willing it with every fiber of his being. He thought that if he tried hard enough to wake himself up—but was he asleep?—perhaps he could pre-empt the darkhaired man's verbal death sentence and avoid being shot. Again. For real.

He repeated it like a mantra, plaintively: "Wake up, wake up, wake up!"

Nothing changed, nothing happened.

Ritchie was still standing there beside the half-naked Mrs Hunt, her arms casually crossed over her massive chest in the faintest and least possibly credible gesture of modesty. A nasty smile lingered on her lips as she glared hatefully at her fuming husband.

Mr Hunt stormed up to Ritchie, his arms at his side, his hands balling into fists. Righteous fury welled in those black, devil's asshole eyes and he bared his tiny, sharp teeth, hissing outraged breaths through his thin lips.

"It's you," Ritchie whimpered at him again.

"Who the hell else did you think it would be?" Hunt hissed. "This is my house, goddamn it. And that thing is my wife, slut though she is."

With all his heart, Ritchie wanted to run. His eyes kept flicking down to watch Mr Hunt's hands, expecting to see the big black gun appear at any second. Where would Hunt shoot him this time? Surely, nothing could be worse than in the balls. Could it? Ritchie sure as shooting did not want to find out. But try as he might, his feet were rooted to the spot. He might as well have been bolted into leg irons for all his ability to flee.

"You were in my dreams," Ritchie cried out. "Now you're here. You're from my dreams and you have the... But this is real. This isn't a dream. This is... Is this real?"

Some shred of Mr Hunt's fury was diverted into puzzlement. Those bushy, black eyebrows that met in the middle were arched ever so slightly as Hunt looked at his wife and said: "What in the hell is this idiot babbling about?"

Mrs Hunt had already dropped the pretense of embarrassment at being caught out by her husband. She shrugged, then bent down to pick up her bikini top and re-fastened it over her chest as her husband and Ritchie watched. She did it as casually and off-handedly as another woman might have scratched her ear.

"Is that all you have to say for yourself?" Mr Hunt growled.

Mrs Hunt wrinkled her perfect nose at her husband and stuck out her tongue.

"Bitch," he hissed.

"What are you doing home so early, anyway? Dear."

Mr Hunt shook his head in disbelief. His angry eyes roamed up and down his wife's exquisite form like a steamroller. Ritchie followed the man's gaze and noticed a tiny designer label stitched into the bottom half of the suit: Thog's Thongs. Mr Hunt's fury seemed to grow again as he studied his wife and raised his hand. Ritchie was momentarily relieved to see that there was no gun in it, but when the hand balled back into a fist, Ritchie was sure that Hunt was going to hit his wife.

Instead he just pointed at her with a quaking finger.

"I came home to see if there was a way to work things out between us. I'll have you know that I walked out on a very important pitch meeting because I thought our marriage was more important than some goddamn movie. I threw away a half-a-million dollar deal so we could sit and talk and try to figure things out. And what do I come home to find?"

Mr Hunt turned to look at Ritchie, who was still frozen in place. He raised his other hand—still no gun, Ritchie saw and practically fainted with relief—and gestured at Ritchie.

"I find you getting your rocks off with a... a... pool guy."

Mr Hunt actually began to shake with fury. He bared his nasty little teeth and those deathly black eyes seemed to recede to some distant point within his deep-set sockets. The way he was shaking made him look like some cartoon character about to blow out steam from his ears. Ritchie's fear overwhelmed him, propelled him, finally, into movement. He took a step back away from Mr Hunt and stumbled over the open housing of the pool filter. He landed hard on the decking, letting out a pained squeal as he fell.

He fell right beside the gut-shot rat whose dead eyes seemed to be enjoying the scene they beheld. Mr Hunt took a step forward and Ritchie cried out.

"Don't shoot me! You're going to shoot me again. Please don't shoot me!"

"Shoot you?" Mr Hunt asked.

Then he looked at the dead rat next to Ritchie and smiled.

"Maybe that's not such a bad idea," Hunt said. "Rats are only good for shooting. That's what vermin deserve."

"Oh, leave him alone, Jerry," Mrs Hunt said. She rolled her eyes at the heavens then looked down at her perfectly manicured nails. "I swear, sometimes you act like the world is just another one of your stupid action movies or dopey melodramas. For God's sake, we were just messing around. Just goofing."

"Goofing?" Jerry Hunt asked, incredulously. He looked down at Ritchie, still cowering on the ground. "Goofing?"

Ritchie didn't know what to say. So he just nodded.

"Well, I guess that's all right, then," Hunt said. "If pool guy was just goofing with your tits and ass—*my* tits and ass—then that's no big thing now, is it? Maybe I should take the Bill Clinton view: blowjobs don't count. It's just goofing! Hey, you know what?"

Ritchie assumed it was a rhetorical question.

"I can goof, too," Hunt said. "Watch this."

And as the world went all slow-motion around him again, Ritchie watched as Mr Hunt reached down and picked up the shovel that Ritchie had used to scrape the rat out of the pool filter. Dark brown rat ichors still dripped from the edge of the blade.

"Look at me," the dark-haired man shouted to the world. "I'm goofing. My name is Goofy."

And he raised the shovel and brought it down with all his might against the side of Ritchie's head. Somehow, Ritchie managed to flinch at the last possible moment and took only a glancing blow.

It was still enough to send a bolt of pain through him and briefly turn out his lights.

"Please," Ritchie hacked, rolling on the ground and clutching at his head. "Please don't kill me."

"Let's goof around with Goofy," Hunt screamed.

And he caught Ritchie with a much more solid blow to the chest. Ritchie heard several ribs go crunch. He tried to roll away from the attack and felt something sharp pop out through the skin where his ribs had been broken. He cried out in pain.

"Jesus, Jerry," Mrs Hunt said, with shockingly little conviction.

"I always hated Goofy," Hunt said. He followed Ritchie as he rolled across the pool decking. "I always hated all those fucking Disney characters. Especially Goofy, the stupid son-of-a-bitch. But you know who I do like?"

Hunt lifted the shovel up like a golf club and took a little chip shot at Ritchie's knee. Ritchie screamed again as Hunt connected for the hole-in-one.

"Bugs Bunny," Hunt said. He used the sharp edge of the shovel blade to chop at Ritchie's ankle. The metal pierced half an inch into the flesh and Ritchie howled yet again.

"Bugs doesn't take shit from anyone. And he doesn't get mad, oh no. He gets even."

Hunt unexpectedly flipped the shovel up into the air and caught it upside down. The handle end was now pointed straight down at Ritchie's face. Hunt displayed a look of unholy joy as he raised the shovel up and smashed the handle into Ritchie's mouth, shattering his front teeth, bottom and top. Ritchie gagged as he swallowed a mouthful of the sharp bony fragments of his incisors, and felt them tear up the inside of his throat as they went down.

Mr Hunt raised the shovel over his head, preparing to rain the deathblow down on Ritchie's skull. He was seething with fury, his breath coming in fractured rasps, his small black eyes filled to the brim with raw and violent hate.

He tossed the shovel into the pool. He looked down at Ritchie and shook his head.

"Look at you, scumbag," he spat. "My misery of a wife tries to get my attention by banging the lowest form of life she can find. Thank God we haven't got any gerbils."

That elicited another half-hearted "Tsk" from Mrs. Hunt.

"But this," the dark-haired man said, still shaking his head, "A fucking pool guy. A glorified janitor without so much as a crummy set of keys to clip to his belt loop. Oh, I bet your parents are mighty proud of you, huh, Einstein? Are you everything they dreamed about?"

Mr Hunt leaned over and spat in Ritchie's mangled face. He then started to walk away.

He stopped, looked back at Ritchie and said: "Aww, what the fuck."

He raised his foot and brought the heel down with all his weight on the middle of Ritchie's face. Ritchie heard, then felt his nose crunch in the instant before the shards of bone shot up into his brain.

No scream this time. No blackness.

But an unexpected explosion of white light.

Blinding white light, brighter than the nova death of a sun. Only twice as hot and painful.

Ritchie's eyes are open. How can this be? The light is shining down from above. He squints, closes his eyes and the brightness diminishes slightly.

Ritchie turns his head and opens his eyes again. He can see himself. In a mirror. The mirror occupies the entire length of a long wall.

Ritchie isn't dead. This isn't heaven (though he sure feels like hell). He blinks once, twice. Tries to clear his vision.

Ritchie Almaraes is lying on a table, much like the examination table at the clinic in his dream.

Was it a dream? Was *this* a dream? What did any of it mean anymore?

Ritchie sees himself lying on the table. Snakes of cables lead from electrodes attached to his head, his chest, his limbs. The cables lead down the table legs and disappear into a series of sockets set in the floor. The room is all white except for the odd bits of silver equipment and electronics and the brown of Ritchie's skin.

He pokes his tongue around his mouth and studies himself some more in the mirror. His teeth are all there, unbroken. His head, his chest, his legs have sustained no injuries.

He is unharmed. He is whole.

But where is he?

"Help," Ritchie whispers.

No one and nothing answers his call.

He tries it again, a little louder. Then again, louder still.

Finally, with nothing else to try, he screams.

SIX

Ritchie fully expected to wake up in his bed once the screaming had stopped, but when he opened his eyes he found he was still lying on the hard examination table in the unfamiliar white room. He literally pinched his skin in order to try and figure out if he was awake or asleep. (And does that even really work, he wondered, or do you just dream that you are pinching yourself into wakefulness?)

He was awake. At least, so far as it was now possible for him to discern the difference between dream and reality.

Still lying on the table, he studied the situation again in the room-length mirror. He was naked but for a tiny pair of gray briefs that felt a little bit too tight in the crotch. His hair was mussed and slick beneath the electrodes attached to various points in a circle around his scalp, and the skin on his chest glistened where some thick goo had been applied to his skin underneath the web of electrodes attached there. Two further electrodes and attached snaking cables were affixed to each thigh, and two more to each ankle. He could see in the reflection that underneath the bed of the examination table a flat screen monitor flashed an incomprehensible series of numbers and characters. He leaned out and hung his head over the edge of the table to get a better look at the monitor, but he still couldn't make any sense of what it might have meant. The only item of information that he understood on the screen was the flashing identifier: R ALMARES.

The equipment bore an unfamiliar logo: VirtuaCorp.

Feeling slightly dizzy, Ritchie swung himself back up on to the table. Some of the dizziness passed and he slowly allowed himself to sit up.

"Hey!" he called out again.

The word bounced back at him off the walls of the sterile room, but there was no reply.

"The hell with this," Ritchie said. He began to tear the numerous electrodes off of his body, starting with the mass of them on his chest. The pads attached to his head tore tufts of his hair out with

them as Ritchie ripped them off, but it made him feel good to be doing something, taking some kind of action. The cables clattered to the floor and the monitor beneath the table started to beep. Ritchie gingerly eased himself off the table and onto his unsteady legs. His knees buckled as they took his weight and he had to prop himself up with his elbows on the table as the circulation slowly returned to his stinging limbs. He shook out one leg, then the other before taking a tentative step.

He could walk, son of a gun! And at only age thirty-seven. Wouldn't mama be proud?

Ritchie slowly walked around the room, shaking off the nagging sensation of pins and needles in his legs and feet. He felt exposed walking around in jockey shorts, and a tiny bit cold as well. He rubbed his hands over his chest, but his fingers came away covered in the sticky conducting goo that had been applied to him. He spotted a fat roll of paper towels on a steel table in the corner and went over and grabbed a fistful to clean himself off. The table also held a set of very menacing-looking stainless steel surgical instruments.

What the hell are they for, he wondered, as a small shiver went down his naked back.

The wall opposite to the big-mirrored one housed two large black boxes with another series of cables emerging from various points. Ritchie went over and placed his hands on the boxes and felt a slight vibration coming from within, along with a faint humming noise. Each of the boxes had a digital lock and keypad, and though Ritchie briefly toyed with them, punching in strings of numbers and characters at random, neither could be budged.

"Open sesame," he whispered at the locked cases. But that didn't work, either.

The only other items in the room were a metal stool with wheels—of the exact same kind that Doctor Rosoff had sat on in his dream about the clinic—and a hospital gurney with leather straps and a tiny white pillow of the useless variety invariably provided on airplanes. The gurney was covered with a white sheet that had a nasty brown stain in the middle.

Ritchie didn't like the look of that one little bit.

There was only one door into the room, set into the wall adjacent to the mirrored panel. It featured a digital lock and keypad and the tiny VirtuaCorp logo. Ritchie toyed with this, repeatedly pressing a blinking red button at the bottom of the keypad, but his fiddling elicited no response. He tried pushing on the door, then shoving at it with his shoulder. Finally, he launched a heavy kick at the middle of the door, but all he got for his effort was a pain in his foot.

The door was as solid as a granite boulder.

Looking up, Ritchie noticed a pair of large air conditioning ducts set into the ceiling. He briefly considered the possibility that he could reach them if he stood on the table and jumped, but decided that the ceiling was too high and that it was a silly, *Mission Impossible* kind of an idea for an escape.

And where would he escape to? From where?

He walked back over to look at himself in the big-mirrored wall. He had a strong idea that the mirror was two-way and that he was probably being observed from the other side. He leaned into the mirror and put his face right up against it, putting his hands around his eyes to block out the bright lights, trying to squint through and see who or what was lurking on the other side.

He couldn't see a damned thing.

"Hey," he called out again. "Hey! Is anybody in there?"

He started to pound on the mirror with his palm. Then with his fist. The mirror shook slightly.

"Can anybody hear me?" he yelled. "Hey, I'm talking to you, asshole!"

Then he heard a crackle. He turned around, but he couldn't see anything. The crackle came again and he identified the sound as coming from speakers set somewhere in the ceiling. He looked up, but couldn't find exactly where they were secreted.

The sound of an out-of-breath man's voice emerged from the speakers. The voice was hoarse and Ritchie heard the man clear his throat and then say: "I'm sorry, Mr Almares, but we seem to be experiencing some... ahhh... temporary technical difficulties. I'm sure

we'll have it all taken care of in a minute, so if you would be so good as to—"

The voice suddenly cut out. This was followed by another loud crackle from the speakers and some feedback that made Ritchie wince and cover his ears.

"Terribly sorry about that," the voice said. "Now, Mr Almarest, if you would kindly just go and lie back down on the diagnostic table and wait until—"

"Whoa!" Ritchie yelled, looking up and talking to the ceiling. He felt like he was having a conversation with God. "Where am I? Who are you? What the hell is going on here?"

The speakers cut out again and the lights dimmed slightly then came back up. The big black boxes on the far wall continued to hum. Then the voice returned.

"Mr Almarest. You are really in no condition to be walking around just now. You should not have removed the monitoring equipment without super vision and you most definitely need to lie back down. VirtuaCorp cannot be held responsible for—"

"VirtuaCorp?" Ritchie yelled. "What the hell is that? Who are you people and what you are trying to do to me? Get me the hell out of this room right now or I swear I'll sue your asses from here to Sacramento."

"Mister—" the voice began, but the speakers zizzed and cut out again. What kind of second-rate operation was this?

Ritchie went back over to the big mirror. It had to be there for purposes of observation and he began pounding on it with his fists again, certain that the voice he'd heard must be sitting on the other side.

"Come on, asshole!" he yelled, pounding harder. "Talk to me! You come in here right now and talk to me face to face. I know you've got to be back there somewhere."

No reply.

Ritchie looked around the spartan room. He needed something to smash the mirror with. He ran over and picked up a few of the surgical instruments, but they were much too small and light.

The stool.

It was metal and bottom heavy with those steel wheels, but with a little effort Ritchie was able to pick it up and wield it in front of him. He took a practice run at the mirror, but pulled his punch. He took five steps back, ready to crash into it for real.

"If you don't come in here right now, I'm busting through," he yelled. "On the count of three."

Ritchie waited for an answer, but there was none forthcoming.

"One," he shouted. And started to rock on his heels.

"Two." He took a deep breath and got ready to run at the mirror.

"Three!"

Just as he started to take off, Ritchie heard a whoosh behind him. He turned around and saw the door slide open. A small, very pale man with frizzy, ginger-red hair walked in. He was wearing a white, calf-length lab coat and enormous Coke bottle bottom eyeglasses. He had the look of a lab technician. The door immediately shot closed behind him.

Beads of sweat dotted the man's ill-shaven upper lip and he was slightly out of breath. His hands were stuffed in the pockets of his lab coat and he looked distinctly nervous to be there in the room with Ritchie.

"Would you please put that stool down now, Mr Almaraes?" he said. His voice cracked and he had to clear his throat again. This was undoubtedly the man who had been speaking to Ritchie over the intercom.

"I want some answers first," Ritchie said, holding the stool like a shield. He had nothing useful to do with the stool now and it was quite heavy. He felt vaguely foolish, but also very exposed in just his underwear. Nevertheless, he eased the stool down on the floor in front of him, keeping a firm grip on the seat with his fingers.

"Thank you," the man said. He removed his hands from his pockets and slowly held them out in front of him in a placating gesture to Ritchie. It was the way you might approach a big dog that you didn't know and weren't sure was friendly. "There is no reason for you to be so upset."

"Like hell!" Ritchie said. "I want you to tell me where I am and what's going on here. Where are my clothes?"

The technician made a "take-it-easy" gesture with his hands and offered Ritchie the falsest and most non-reassuring of all possible smiles.

"You are at the offices of VirtuaCorp, Mr Almares. Remember? You are in our dream lab."

"The what?" Ritchie protested.

"You are here in the dream lab at VirtuaCorp. Part of it, anyway. I know you're feeling disoriented at the moment and that is perfectly normal. You entered the facility of your own accord. I can show you the signed contracts. Doctor Rosoff recommended you for the therapy."

"Therapy?" Ritchie said. He was completely confused, but felt some of the anger begin to drain out of him. The man in the white coat took a cautious step towards him and Ritchie tensed up again, grabbing at the stool for defense.

"It's okay, it's okay!" the man said, taking the step back. "You are participating in a new dream therapy experiment. It's part of the program designed to help you to deal with your sleeping problems, remember? With your issues of persistent nightmares."

"Dream therapy?" Ritchie asked. He shook his head. None of this sounded remotely familiar to him or made even the slightest bit of sense. The man was talking crazy talk.

Ritchie started to advance on him. He left the stool behind but his hands balled into fists.

"You've got to give me some better answers than that," Ritchie said. "I want to get out of here and I mean right now. Where's my stuff?"

The man in the white coat started backing away toward the door. He was sweating profusely now and looked very scared.

"I'm warning you, Mr Almares, take it easy. You must calm yourself. I've already signaled for the orderlies and they will restrain you if need be. They will be here any—"

"Fuck you!" Ritchie screamed and charged the man. He grabbed him about the middle and slammed him into the wall at full speed. The man let out a pained "Ooooph" and doubled over. Ritchie grabbed him by the lapels of his lab coat and hauled him back to an

upright position. The technician's glasses had gone cockeyed on his face and Ritchie smacked them off entirely with a backhand blow. He heard a tinkle as they shattered upon contact with the floor.

"I want some goddamn answers and I want them now," he yelled into the man's twisted face. "Who's in charge here? It can't be you. Is Doctor Rosoff here? I want to talk to her and I want to talk to her right this minute."

Ritchie hauled off and punched the man as hard as he could in the stomach. The man doubled over again and collapsed to the floor moaning and writhing. Ritchie drew his foot back to launch a kick at the prone man's pained face, when the *whoosh* of the door sounded again behind him.

Seething with anger, dripping with sweat and ready to take on any and all comers, Ritchie spun around and snarled.

And collapsed to his knees at the sight of the dark-haired man glaring at him.

Mr Hunt?

Or his own personal demon from hell?

Ritchie just didn't know anymore.

The dark-haired man smiled that now terrifyingly familiar death's head rictus of a grin. He, too, wore a white lab coat, just as he had in the dream at the clinic when he was a doctor. His wavy black hair seemed to shimmer in Ritchie's vision like a moiré pattern on a television screen. His black eyes were tiny tunnels into an endless void.

Ritchie knew what had to be coming. He shook his head, whined from deep in his throat.

The dark-haired man pulled the black gun out of his pocket. He casually strode over to where Ritchie knelt on the floor.

Ritchie didn't try to get up. He didn't try to fight, didn't try to run away.

What was the point?

The dark-haired man reached down and pressed his cold finger to Ritchie's chin, easing open the pool guy's mouth. Slowly and sensually, he slipped the long, thick barrel of the gun between

Ritchie's quivering lips. The notched gunsight clattered against Ritchie's chattering teeth.

In the barrel went, up it pressed against the top of Ritchie's mouth. He could taste the copper of the gun—or was it blood?—and smell his impending death.

"Wake-up," the dark haired man whispered like a secret lover. And pulled the trigger, blowing the top of Ritchie's head off. This time he didn't even scream.

SEVEN

"Jesus wept," Ritchie cried.

He was sitting up in his bed, his hands resting on top of his head as if he was in police custody. In fact, he was just checking to see if the top half of his skull was still where it should be.

So far, so good.

He looked all around the bedroom. Everything—hair, scalp and brains included—was exactly where it was supposed to be. Yesterday's clothes (which, in point of fact, were destined to be today's clothes, too) were still dangling from the back of his folding chair, an ugly Rorschach pattern bleached out of his blue LA Lakers T-shirt where he had accidentally splashed some chlorine on it. His flip-flops lay exactly where he remembered having kicked them off the night before, right on top of the plastic take out box still holding, or so he had to assume, the bones of his El Pollo Loco dinner. Outside, the morning sun was shining on another bright southern California day and he could hear the rush of traffic roaring past as per usual on Palms Boulevard. From the alley beneath his bedroom window came the clattering din of the garbage contractors emptying the apartment building's big dumpsters. That meant that it was Thursday, just as it should have been.

Richie pulled off his T-shirt and carefully examined his chest and belly for scars. He yanked down his briefs and had a good look at his cock and balls.

Everything was coming up roses so far. No flies in the ointment, no sugar in the engine.

No indications of bloodshed or mutilation of any kind. Hooray!

"Is it really over?" Ritchie asked himself.

He tensed up. How could he possibly be sure? How many of these dreams was he going to have to wake from before he woke up for real? After so many false starts, Ritchie didn't trust anything. He didn't know what to believe or what to expect.

Actually, that was not strictly true; he expected the worst at all times.

Ritchie heard a noise from the hall and froze. Leonard; it had to be Leonard. Was he about to come in? Was that going to make it start all over again?

Which Leonard would it be?

Leonard walked right on past Ritchie's bedroom door and into the bathroom. Ritchie waited, heard their noisy shower come on and Leonard start to sing the opening lines of "I'm Turning Japanese." It was Leonard's favorite song and he sang it every goddamn morning in the shower. Ritchie endlessly complained to Leonard about it, but Leonard would just shrug and continue to sing it to himself. "Let Leonard be Leonard," he would usually say.

No song had ever sounded so sweet to Ritchie. Leonard was crooning the heavenly tune of mundane reality. The morning was precisely what it should be, with not a single oddity to note or item out of place or amiss.

Ritchie let out an enormous sigh and slumped back into bed with a big smile on his face.

"It is over," he said and laughed. "It's over, it's over, it's over."

Ritchie lay there and listened to the water run in the bathroom, reveling in the return of normality and an end to bad dreams. When Leonard finished with his shower and walked past the door on his way back to his room, Ritchie called out a chirpy and very uncharacteristic "good morning" to his roommate.

Puzzled, Leonard stuck his head in the door and nodded back at Ritchie. Then he said: "Wow, do you ever look awful this morning. Have you been up all night?"

"Hardly," Ritchie said.

"Bad dream or something?" Leonard asked.

"Something," Ritchie coughed, and it became a bitter laugh. "Bad dream doesn't begin to describe it, Leonard, my man."

Leonard spotted the take out box on the floor and made a sour face. "I've told you not to eat that junk food, man. All the chemicals in that crap do things to your stomach. And to your head. You've got to live more naturally."

Normally Ritchie would have been annoyed by Leonard's comment; Leonard himself moved from fad to fad and was always

trying to improve Ritchie in one way or another, too. This very fine morning, however, he merely nodded his head. "You just might be right about that, Lenny. I will definitely consider it."

Leonard was seriously taken aback by that. He examined his roommate as if, perhaps, some pod person had replaced the Ritchie he knew in the night. Ritchie just continued to smile broadly.

"You okay, Ritchie?" Leonard asked. "You ain't been smoking that weed this early in the morning, have you?"

"No weed, nothing like that," Ritchie said. "And I am as fine as fine can be, I think. Yeah, I think I finally am."

"Okay, glad to hear it," Leonard said, still looking confused. He started back down the hall.

"Hey," Ritchie called out. "Hey, Lenny!"

Leonard leaned his upper half through the door.

"The rent's due soon, huh?" Ritchie asked.

He was determined that he was in no way going to re-enact any part of the recurring scenario that had been plaguing his dreams.

"Uhh, yeah," Leonard said. He stepped fully into Ritchie's bedroom. "I didn't like to mention it to you because... you've been a little bit, you know..."

"Say no more," Ritchie told him, holding up his hands. "I get paid today after I do the Hunt job. I'll have the money cash on the barrel for you tonight. So don't sweat."

"Great," Leonard said. He was still wondering about the possibility of the body snatcher scenario, but decided it was best not to look a gift pod in the mouth.

"You're going to be late for work, Leonard. Catch you later," Ritchie said. Then added: "Hey, maybe we can go to Riley's later, huh? Grab ourselves a couple, three frosty ones and some popcorn. Watch the ballgame. Dodgers can't lose again tonight."

"Yeah," Leonard said, shaking his head in bafflement at the sudden chumminess of his normally distant roommate. "Sounds good."

"Copasetic," Ritchie said, and gave Leonard a big thumb's up.

Leonard drifted off back to his room. Ritchie glanced at the clock, saw he had plenty of time to relax and enjoy the morning before he had to get his things together and head out to the Hunts' place in

Brentwood. His lengthy dream saga was already starting to fade from consciousness. It had been one weird experience, but in the end it was all just a dream.

As it always had to be.

Still, he reached down into his briefs and gave his balls a reassuring squeeze just for comfort's sake.

Just then Leonard, still fastening his tie, peered back in through the doorway.

"Whoa! Sorry, guy," he said, turning away.

"No, no," Ritchie called. "Just scratching, bro, just scratching." He pulled his hand out of his shorts, and even managed a self-deprecating chuckle.

"Oh, okay. Listen, I have to head out to the store, but the mailman brought this for you, registered delivery. I had to sign for it. I hope that's okay."

"No problem," Ritchie said. "I didn't hear the door, though."

"I guess you must have still been in dreamland," Leonard said with a shrug. He stepped into the bedroom and tossed the letter onto the bed at Ritchie's feet. He offered Ritchie a little salute with two fingers then went out. Ritchie heard the front door of the apartment slam shut a few seconds later.

The envelope had landed face down on the bed. Ritchie started to pick it up then heard a loud bang from outside. It sounded frighteningly like a gunshot and made him go all cold inside. Without even realizing it Ritchie had clutched one hand to his belly. He sidled over to the window and cautiously glanced outside. The garbage men had moved on to the next building and were standing around a big wooden pallet that they had obviously dropped and that had broken into pieces in the middle of the alley. The workers were yelling and pointing fingers at each other over the mess.

It wasn't a gunshot. It wasn't anything at all out of the ordinary.

It was still just another average day in West Los Angeles.

Ritchie smiled.

He started for the bathroom then remembered the letter. He scooped it off the bed to take with him to read on the can.

He got as far as the doorway before he froze reading the return address. In the upper left hand corner of the envelope was a horrifyingly familiar logo: *VirtuaCorp*.

The address was on Beaumont Avenue, a street name he didn't recognize in Tarzana, up in the San Fernando Valley. As far as he was aware, Ritchie had never been in Tarzana in his entire life.

"Please, god, no," he whispered. He looked all around the room again, as if expecting the very walls to melt away and leave him exposed to yet another nightmare.

The walls held. For the moment.

Ritchie's hands were shaking as he fumbled with tearing open the envelope. He dropped it twice as he tried to remove the papers inside. He read the cover page once, twice, a third time.

He couldn't make any sense of it. He read it again:

Dear Richard Almares:

With reference to account number 23004RJA, this PAST DUE notice is a SECOND reminder as regards your outstanding account balance. Attached please find an itemized summary of all costs and expenses incurred by you, broken down on a per session basis, for your completed VirtuaCorp Dream Therapy™ experience. Please be reminded that as specified and agreed in your signed contract, full remittance was payable to us upon successful completion of the course of treatments. Please note again that payment can only be made in the form of cash or certified check. Please do not remit cash through the post.

Yours truly,

Ritchie tried to make out the name scrawled across the bottom of the letter. It looked like it said *A Megaera*, but he couldn't really be sure. It sure wasn't any name that he knew or had ever heard of before.

He looked at the second page, which puzzled him even more. It was a computer printout of an account of some sort, broken down by date and time, with a long list of appointments and "treatments,"

with meaningless descriptions attached and a costing for each session.

"Removal of localized dysphoria from upper limbic quadrant at 33'17" x 41'04"" read one of the less mysterious therapy summaries. The cost of that particular session was itemized at \$1003.79. Including a five per cent discount, which was not explained.

"Exfoliation of temporary gnomic abnormalities with level two hippocampal dredge," was apparently the business of one of the lengthier sessions. The appointment claimed that the treatment had taken nearly fourteen hours to complete and was billed (with no discount at all) at just under three thousand dollars.

"This is insane," Ritchie said to himself. "This is some kind of joke."

He glanced down at the bottom of the itemized list to see the "total amount now past due."

It seemed that Ritchie Almares currently owed the VirtuaCorp company, whoever the hell they were, a grand total of \$12,341.

And sixty-two cents.

"Oh my God," he said. He glanced at the back of the paper as if there might be some explanation there. It was blank.

Ritchie remembered his final dream. Waking up in the laboratory, or whatever that strange room was, at VirtuaCorp. He'd been all wired-up there and had come face-to-face, yet again, with his dream nemesis: the dark-haired man. He didn't know what the hell was going on, but whatever bizarre events he was experiencing, the road clearly led back to VirtuaCorp and their so-called Dream Therapy. If Ritchie was ever going to get out of this mess he was in, if he was ever going to understand what he was going through, the answer clearly rested with them.

He looked again at the address on the front of the envelope. He found his Thomas Guide to Los Angeles County and consulted the map page for Tarzana. There it was: Beaumont Avenue.

He threw on his clothes and ran out the door.

The traffic on the freeway heading up into the Valley was unbearable. Ritchie crawled along in his truck, his anxiety levels growing in inverse proportion to the snail's pace progress he was making on the road. The day had turned out to be blisteringly hot and as the minutes ticked by Ritchie realized he was not going to have time to get back to Brentwood to deal with the Hunts' pool. Or collect his money.

In one of his dreams Mr Hunt had been the darkhaired man. Was he really the dark-haired man, though? Was there really a dark-haired man?

Ritchie just didn't know any more. He didn't know anything. He didn't know if he was really driving up the San Diego Freeway into the San Fernando Valley or if he was only dreaming that he was driving on the freeway. He didn't know if the sweat annoyingly dribbling down his back was real perspiration or just some dream therapy treatment for which he was being billed an arm and a leg. He didn't know if the end of his journey today was destined to take him to a painful death at the end of another blazing gun barrel or if...

Ritchie simply didn't know anything. And it hurt his head to think about it all.

The traffic finally started to ease as he reached the top of the Cahuenga Pass and he was able to pick up a little speed as he turned off at the exit for the Ventura Freeway heading west toward Tarzana. When he looked to his left as he merged the truck onto the actual freeway he caught a glimpse of a woman in a red Lexus in the adjoining lane.

He was certain that the driver was Doctor Rosoff.

"Hey!" Ritchie shouted. The Lexus accelerated past him, then slipped into the outside lane and zipped off even faster. Ritchie banged on his horn hoping to catch her attention, but the Lexus didn't respond. He floored the gas pedal and cut off a driver in a white van, who leaned on his horn and shot Ritchie the bird.

Ritchie didn't even notice.

The red Lexus was three cars ahead of him and moving fast. Ritchie cut back into the center lane to try and pull around the next car in front of him in the fast lane. But just as he did so, a Ralph's

tractor-trailer truck cut into the lane in front of him from the right. Ritchie had to jam on his brakes to stop from rear-ending the big supermarket truck. He swerved back into the fast lane as quickly as he could, but during the brief time that his view had been obstructed by the tractor-trailer, Doctor Rosoff's Lexus had vanished up the freeway.

"Shit," Ritchie complained, pounding his palms against the steering wheel. He pushed his old Dodge truck as fast as it would go, swerving in and out of lanes and eliciting a symphony of car horns. Though he was on a long, straight stretch of the freeway he couldn't again catch sight of the Lexus anywhere in front of him. It must have turned off someplace.

A shortcut to Tarzana, perhaps?

Ritchie had no choice but to continue up the freeway to the Tarzana exit. There was only one way to settle the strange shit that was going down here.

He pushed his old truck as fast as it would go.

Beaumont Avenue was not what Ritchie was expecting it to be. It was an expensive-looking residential street on the western fringe of Tarzana proper. He had assumed, for no good reason, that VirtuaCorp would have their offices in a big office building or one of those modern mirror and steel monstrosities that seemed to litter the landscape all the way from Sherman Oaks to Ventura.

Ritchie checked his Thomas Brothers Guide, but this was definitely the only Beaumont—Avenue, Street, Road, whatever—in this part of Los Angeles County. He eyed up the house numbers as he drove slowly along until he came to a massive Victorian edifice at the top of a steep hill. It was the very last house on the road and was set back some distance from the street. A six foot-high brick wall surrounded the property and there were cruel looking spiked posts set atop the wall every couple of feet. They seemed awfully sharp to be merely ornamental in function.

Ritchie pulled up to the curb right in front of the house and parked. A small brass plaque set into the wall next to the heavy gate was embossed with the now familiar VirtuaCorp logo. In lower case letters below the logo it said: *...making dreams a reality...*

Ritchie pushed on the heavy iron door, but it wouldn't budge. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the buzzer on the gatepost and waited. A surveillance camera buzzed and swiveled on a pole high above him, taking him in for inspection. He looked up at it nervously and waited. After a very long minute, a buzzer sounded and he was able to push open the door.

It mechanically swung shut behind him with a portentous clang of finality.

The front garden of the house was fastidiously landscaped and maintained, with a looping path that led past a series of ovoid flowerbeds of explosive color and a thicket of dense, encompassing shrubs. A small frog pond in the middle of the garden bubbled away, though Ritchie couldn't see any living fauna, just a thick cloud of blue dragonflies buzzing over the middle of the water. At every stage along the path he could look up and find another security camera tracking his movements.

The main house itself was a wonder to behold. He had seen a few of these grandiose Victorian follies that had somehow survived a century's worth of earthquakes down in Los Angeles proper, but they were mostly in the nastier parts of town. (Or what had become the nastier parts of town in the decades since the houses had been built; once upon a time those had been the *good* parts of town.) He had no idea that such ornate and extravagant buildings had ever been erected up in the Valley, which he always thought of as much newer. In any event, he had never cleaned a pool at such a place in his years in the business, and really that was mostly how he knew about houses in Los Angeles.

The gingerbread structure was four stories tall, with ornate gables up and down the façade. Many of the thick, leaded windows held stained glass patterns, and though Ritchie studied them long and hard, he couldn't quite make sense of the designs. Long, thick ivy, of type he'd never seen before anywhere in Southern California, clung

to the side of the house, as if trying to drag the entire building down into the ground. The front door was a massive wooden affair, at least eight feet high with a brass gargoyle knocker that looked as if it would more fittingly adorn a brownstone in Greenwich Village than a mansion in Tarzana. Ritchie felt his knees go weak and his mouth become dry as he neared the massive front portico. He took a quick glance behind him, back toward the street to reassure himself of the distance he would have to flee to get back to the safety of his truck should the need arise.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shadowy shape emerge from the shrubs and disappear around the far corner of the house. Ritchie couldn't be sure—how could he be sure of anything at all?—but in that instant of peripheral vision he would have bet cash money that it *was* Cheto the gardener that he had seen lurking back there.

The very idea froze him in his tracks.

How could it be Cheto? Cheto existed only in his dreams.

But what if it was Cheto? What should he do? What might that mean?

Ritchie thought about running down the path to see if it had been the smarmy gardener from his dream. Then he thought more seriously about simply turning around and running back up the path, getting into his car and driving until he simply couldn't drive any farther. To Alaska maybe. Or the tip of South America.

And what would he do then? What if none of this was real?

How can you ever hope to escape from your dreams?

Ritchie took a deep breath. He licked his dry lips.

He knocked on the door.

He more than half-expected the dark-haired man to open the door with a gun in his hand, ready to shoot Ritchie in some painful new way.

A smallish, almost albino white woman with an entirely round, completely shaved head and a nose ring opened the door. A loose chain of linked gold rings pierced her left ear, while a yellow, number two pencil was perched behind the virginal right one. She wore half-glasses, over which she studied Ritchie, and she carried a yellow leg pad in her hand.

"Mr Almares," she said with a hint of surprise. "We certainly weren't expecting you today."

He was taken greatly aback by her matter-of-fact recognition of him.

"I... want to come inside," he stammered.

"This is highly irregular," the woman said to him.

"Please," he said. "It's... an emergency."

"I doubt that," she said. But she stepped back and waved Ritchie into the cold bosom of VirtuaCorp.

EIGHT

Ritchie felt as though he had stepped through the looking glass and into some gleaming, techno wonderland. Whereas the outside of the building containing VirtuaCorp was all cutesy, nineteenth-century Victorian rococo, the inside was pure twenty-first century metallic gloss. The interior of the old house must have been gutted from basement to attic to prepare it for VirtuaCorp.

What obviously had once been a stairwell leading to the upper floors of the house had been boxed in, giving the entrance area a confined and claustrophobic feel. Steel doors suggested that a tiny elevator had been installed in place of the stairs. The walls stretching up to the high ceiling were ghostly white and entirely barren of decoration, and the onyx floors had been polished until you could see yourself reflected in the deep black.

The bald receptionist led Ritchie into a space which once must have been occupied by the front parlor, but which now looked like the dull waiting room of any overly efficient medical practice. Dull industrial carpeting—easy to clean, ugly to look at—had been laid over the floor and the alabaster receptionist went and sat behind an improbably tidy, big glass and chrome desk dominated by a large, flat screen monitor and an ergonomic keyboard that looked as if it had been designed for Maritan hands. There wasn't so much as a paperclip or stray Post-It note to despoil the neat look and lines of the desktop.

"Take a seat, won't you please, Mr Almarest?" the receptionist said. "I'll try to find out if there is anyone available to speak with you today."

She gestured at an uncomfortable-looking black leather and chrome chair. Ritchie spat out an insincere thank you and sat down. The chair was, indeed, every bit as awkward and uncomfortable to sit on as it looked. A glass coffee table stood next to the chair, but there wasn't so much as an old magazine or promotional brochure on it to look at and it quickly became apparent, as the receptionist sat down and began pecking away at her keyboard, that neither coffee nor any

other refreshment was likely to be coming Ritchie's way any time soon.

Ritchie sat and stared. And fidgeted. There was nothing to see, nothing else to do to pass the time in the waiting room. The walls, as in the hallway, were entirely bare and startlingly white. Colorless louvered blinds were drawn closed over the only window in the room so you couldn't even enjoy the view of the flower gardens. Ritchie looked straight up and saw that the high ceiling, as blankly white as everything else, lacked even those little dimples in its tiles which the desperately bored could sit and count as a means to pass the deadly drag of time.

Ritchie never wore a watch and naturally there was nothing like a clock to be seen in VirtuaCorp's waiting room. He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there in silence—even the receptionist's weird computer keyboard somehow didn't make any noise as she typed—but he was growing increasingly restive and ill at ease. He was sure he must have been there for at least thirty minutes before he cleared his throat at the bald woman.

The receptionist didn't even glance up.

He coughed. Once, twice.

Nothing. No response. Just typety-type-type.

"Excuse me," he finally said, getting annoyed.

"Yes, Mr Almaraes?" the receptionist blithely intoned.

"Do they know I'm here?" he asked.

"The appropriate parties have been suitably informed of your presence, Mr Almaraes."

"Okay. Good."

So he waited some more. A lot more. And still no one came.

Ritchie was starting to get seriously pissed off. Who the hell did these people think they were? The bastards at VirtuaCorp were somehow messing with Ritchie's life, he was certain of that. Whatever it was that was happening to him, all that he had experienced, had to be connected to the crazy bill he had received for their "dream therapy" and Ritchie had taken all the shit he could stand.

When at least another half an hour had elapsed, he got up and stormed over to the receptionist's desk. When she still failed to acknowledge his presence in any way, he pounded on the thick glass with his fist. The receptionist flicked her eyes up at Ritchie, never missing a beat with her still-typing fingers.

"I want to see someone in charge. Right now!" he demanded.

"You didn't make an appointment, did you, Mr Almares?" she replied.

"I don't need no goddamn appointment. I need to see whoever is in charge here and I'm not waiting another goddamn minute."

"As your contract will have very clearly spelled out, clients of VirtuaCorp are not entitled to access to this facility without an agreed appointment. It is all there in black and white in the paperwork, I assure you."

"I don't have any goddamn paperwork!" Ritchie shouted. "I am not one of your stinking clients and I don't know who the hell you people think you are. And if I don't get to talk to somebody who can tell me something right away, there's going to be some serious trouble. You got that, cue ball?"

"Please calm yourself, Mr Almares," the receptionist said in a perfectly composed and even tone. She was still typing on her keyboard. "I have called your records up right here on my screen and they clearly show your signed agreement and authorization for—"

"I don't give a dead rat's ass about your records and contracts," he shouted. "I don't know what kind of scam you people are running here, but I'm not putting up with it for another goddamn minute. What is this dream therapy shit? I never even heard of it until I got your bill in the mail today. But I have been having some seriously fucked-up dreams and this place has got to be the reason for them."

"Mr Almares, there is really no call for you to speak to me in so rude and abrupt a manner. I have feelings, too, you know."

"Lady, I don't know you from a hole in the wall. That's another thing; I've never seen you before and you act like you know me. You talk to me like—"

"I have seen you at least a dozen times, Mr Almares," she said.

"That is total bullshit. It has got to be. I would remember a bald headed bitch like you, believe me."

The receptionist finally stopped pecking at her keyboard. She looked up at Ritchie with no expression whatsoever, seeming to size him up for a minute. She typed a quick final burst of characters into her computer, then stood up. She took her glasses off and placed them carefully on the desktop.

"Frankly, Mr Almaraes, I am distressed and displeased by your attitude," she said. But her tone was as flat and bland as the white walls of the room around them. The receptionist didn't so much as raise an eyebrow or crease a frown line as she spoke. "You have arrived here unscheduled, against company policy of which you have been properly apprised and in violation of the strict terms to which you contracted."

"I told you, I don't know nothing about any goddamn contract. I—"

"Please be calm, Mr Almaraes. In spite of your most irregular and inappropriate behavior, we have admitted you to the premises. You have been waiting here precisely seventy-two minutes now. Not really a long time under the circumstances just outlined. Frankly, it would behoove you to display greater patience in this regard."

"Behoove?" Ritchie spat.

"Nevertheless, I will now endeavor to locate someone who can perhaps placate your obvious distress more readily than I. Can I ask you to kindly go back to your seat and remain there until I return?"

"Okay then," Ritchie agreed.

She continued to stand there and stare at him until he turned around and sat back down in the uncomfortable chair. Then with a shake of her head, she walked out of the room and disappeared up the corridor.

So Ritchie waited.

And he waited.

And then he waited some more.

There was no further sign of the bald receptionist. There was no sign of anyone at all. Nor any movement nor sound to be discerned from within or without the premises of VirtuaCorp. Under other circumstances Ritchie might have thought he was the victim of some

elaborate hoax. Was it possible they were filming a new version of *Candid Camera*? Ritchie hated reality television.

The longer he waited, the more Ritchie's anger grew. He stood up and started to pace around the waiting room. He regularly and repeatedly peered out into the empty white hall. He balled his hands into fists and began swinging them into each other.

Following another surreptitious glance and a few tentative steps down the hall, he went back around to the front of the receptionist's desk and sat down in her very comfortable chair. He pulled it up to the desk and studied the computer screen.

It displayed a high-resolution graphic version of Solitaire.

"Lousy bald bitch," Ritchie hissed. He pounded his fist on the keyboard. Then he knocked the big monitor off the desk with a violent sweep of his arm. It crashed to the floor and went out.

Ritchie stormed off down the hall. He walked past the elevator and the front entrance to a door at the opposite end of the corridor. It was locked and access could only be gained through a digital keypad, like the one he'd tried in his dream. He punched random numbers in futilely, but the door didn't so much as bleep back at him. He kicked it, to no good end.

He walked back up the hall and out of curiosity, tried to open the front door. This too was locked. Only there was no visible means of opening it. No doorknob or keypad to punch. He shoved at it with his shoulder, but there wasn't so much as an inch of give to the door.

Clearly, Ritchie wasn't going anyplace that the masters of VirtuaCorp didn't want him to go.

He turned around and looked at the elevator again. The call button was dark so he touched it and it lit up beneath his finger. He heard a whir from above and moments later the elevator door *shooshed* open. Ritchie cautiously stuck his head inside, holding the door open before entering. The elevator was tiny: large enough for no more than two people standing up. The walls, floor and ceiling were all mirrored steel, broken only by a tiny control panel with a single button on it. It was not marked with a floor number, nor was there any indicator for either up or down.

Ritchie pulled his head out and glanced up and down the corridor again. There was no sight, nor sound of life or activity. Clearly if he wanted an answer of any kind, he had no choice but to take the elevator wherever it led. Ritchie felt a deep pang of apprehension, but tried to repress it by restoking the fury he had felt just minutes before. He was mad and he had every right to be. Enough was enough!

He stepped inside the elevator. The doors closed before he could even touch the little button. He swallowed down a lump in his throat and touched his finger to the control pad.

Nothing happened.

He touched the button again. And waited.

The doors remained closed, the elevator did not move.

Ritchie was suddenly overwhelmed by a strong feeling of claustrophobia. The elevator was so tiny and seemed to tighten around him. No matter which way he looked he could not help but see his own worried reflection. He suddenly had a terrible feeling that the lights were going to go off and he would be trapped in there in the dark. The elevator would become a steel coffin from which he could never escape. It had all been some sinister and elaborate trap.

Ritchie's breathing was coming in rasps now. He tried to rekindle his anger, but the panic started to overwhelm all his other feelings. He opened his mouth, touched his tongue to his dry lips and prepared to scream for help.

The elevator started to move. It was going up. "Shi-I-I-I-t," Ritchie exhaled.

The elevator rose ever so slowly. Ritchie could barely even feel the incremental ascent. He had gone up the height of skyscrapers in less time than it was taking this elevator to go up what could be no more than the three floors of the old Victorian house.

But still the elevator rose.

The doors flew open.

Ritchie threw himself out of the car while the getting was good. He paid no attention to what was on the outside, feeling only that he had to get out of the confines of that tiny metal box.

The doors immediately closed again behind him. A faint whir told Ritchie that the elevator was going back down.

He found himself standing in another white corridor, perhaps thirty feet long. Ritchie could see closed doors at either end, and nothing but the closed elevator door in the middle.

What had they done to this house? How big was it?

Ritchie played a mental game of eenie, meenie, miney, mo. He caught the tiger by the toe and picked the door to his right as the one to try first. He didn't have high hopes, which was fortunate because just as on the corridor downstairs, the door at this end was locked, with yet another of those digital keypads to mock Ritchie's helplessness. He didn't bother to punch any numbers into it, but he did pause to give the pad a little karate chop of frustration.

It merely hurt the side of his hand.

Steeling himself, he took the long walk down the length of the corridor to the opposite end. Another closed door. He pushed at it, but it was also locked. He glanced at the keypad.

And saw that four of the numbers on it—nine, six, one, two—were illuminated. A small green button at the bottom, where the star key would be on a telephone pad, was blinking on and off. Ritchie reached out with his index finger, then drew it back. He studied the pad again.

"Why the hell not?" he asked himself.

He punched the green button with his finger.

The lock on the door clicked with the sound of a snapping finger.

Ritchie pushed the door open and walked inside.

NINE

Ritchie thought that he'd somehow walked into the cockpit of a space shuttle.

The room was about the size of Ritchie's bedroom at home, but it was packed to the rafters with various bits of electronics. One entire wall was a bank of video monitors stacked one on top of the other. Over the years, Ritchie had seen pictures of the booths from which television shows were directed, with their stacks of video screens and mixing desks with editing and lighting units, and this looked exactly like such a control room. There was a huge mixing desk with literally hundreds of buttons and switches and joysticks and faders and all manner of digital readouts. Ultra-light headphones dangled from several posts along the desk, as did some other peculiar looking pieces of headgear with glowing goggles attached. The rear wall held two, large black boxes that hummed slightly, even over the buzz of the other equipment in the room. They looked exactly the same as the locked black boxes he had seen in the "diagnostic" room in which he had awoken in his VirtuaCorp dream.

He held his hand against the top of one of the two boxes and felt the same faint vibration coming from within.

One wall consisted entirely of a large window. Ritchie walked over to it and peered through.

He could see the diagnostic room from his dreams. The examination table was exactly where he remembered it being. The gurney with the straps was there, as was the metal stool he'd threatened to use to break the mirror. He had to be on the other side of that mirror, he realized. Ritchie could even see the little kit of surgical instruments sitting on the steel table in the corner, just as in his dream. He scoured the floor searching for any sign of the shards of glass from the lab technician's broken spectacles, but, of course, the floor was hospital clean.

"What the..." he whispered.

On the fourth wall hung—or was embedded—an immense plasma screen monitor. It was easily the biggest one Ritchie had ever seen,

with the most astonishing resolution. It might just as well have been another window on real life. He found himself thinking that it would be great to have one of these babies in the living room to watch the Dodgers on.

The image displayed on the big screen was of the control room in which Ritchie now stood. He looked up at himself, watching himself watch himself on the immense plasma screen. On that screen was the self-same image, proportionally reduced. Like mirrors reflecting mirrors, the effect created an infinite recursion loop of ever tinier Ritchies watching himself, and watching himself watching himself and...

He turned around to look for the camera that had to be recording him, but he couldn't spot it amid the mass of electronic gear and gizmos. All the Ritchies turned to look. None of them was any more successful in locating the source.

Ritchie felt that he had to sit down.

He all but fell into one of the leather chairs perched in front of the huge mixing board. Ritchie lay his head down on his hands on top of the control panel. It was too much for his weary brain to cope with. He accidentally punched one of the buttons with his elbow and heard something go *fwoooosh!*

A tray slid out of the panel next to his knee. It was an automatic disc tray, of the type you see on every CD and DVD player and computer disk drive. It held a silvery disk within. A label identified the disk: R ALMARES: MASTER CODE.

Ritchie's jaw literally dropped open. He delicately removed the disk from the tray and held it up for examination.

It resembled any other CD or DVD he had ever seen. There was nothing special about it at all. He examined both sides, but it was no more interesting to look at than the AOL trial disk that arrives with your junk mail.

He gingerly placed it back into the tray. He hesitated for a moment, staring at his reflection in its shiny surface some more, then gently tapped the edge of the tray and watched as it hissed closed. He could hear the drive rev up as it spun the disk around.

On top of the panel, next to his elbow, a small LED lit up under a button marked "Play."

Ritchie looked up at himself on the big plasma screen. From this angle he could only see the back and side of his head looking at the wall with the screen. No help or advice from that quarter. Or any other.

He touched a shaky finger to the "Play" button.

Nothing changed on the plasma screen, but one of the monitors in the big bank of screens in front of him—marked PREVIEW—went black, then came back on with a flash. The screen alternated between flashes of black and white then a series of numbers and characters, gibberish to Ritchie, began to flow from top to bottom. They passed by so quickly that Ritchie couldn't make any sense of what they might say. He tapped at the "Pause" button on the mixing deck, but the long display of data just kept whizzing by. Frustrated, Ritchie pressed the button to open the tray and the screen returned to black as the disk popped out.

Ritchie removed the disk again and was about to fling it against the back wall, when he spotted the case for it. It was in a big pile of jewel box CD cases, stacked on the floor beside the mixing table. Ritchie tossed the disk onto the desk and went over to investigate.

Each of the jewel box cases held a silver disk. Each disk was marked, like the first, with a simple label and they were neatly ordered. The first label read: R ALMARES, SCENARIO #1.

Then: R ALMARES, SCENARIO #2A, R ALMARES, SCENARIO #2B, R ALMARES, SCENARIO #3...

Ritchie did a quick count and guessed that there were more than fifty disks in the stack.

"Madre de dios," he whispered.

He pulled the top case from the pile and removed the disk from within. He placed it in the still open tray and pressed it closed. He waited for it to load and then punched the "Play" button again.

The PREVIEW screen lit up. The image that appeared on it made Ritchie gasp. He clapped his hands to his cheeks in a near-comical manner. But there was nothing at all to laugh at here.

The image on the monitor was of his bedroom at home. The room appeared in every messy detail from the El Pollo Loco box on the floor to the spilled pile of cents on the corner of his desk. VirtuaCorp had been in his apartment—in his room—recording his life that very day.

"Sons of bitches," Ritchie said.

He reached into the pile and randomly grabbed for another disk. He slotted it into the tray.

The screen flickered and then up came an image that made Ritchie more than gasp. For a minute he thought he was going to be sick.

The monitor displayed a view of the medical clinic on Sepulveda: Doctor Rosoff's office. Ritchie was looking at the examination room where he had seen the doctor in his dream. As he watched, Doctor Rosoff walked into the room and approached the examination table. The image froze.

Doctor Rosoff moved and proceeded in precisely the same manner as she had done in his dream. But how could that be?

Ritchie punched at the buttons, but the image didn't change. For some reason the disk appeared to be locked at that point. He opened the tray, tossed the disk aside and put in another.

The pool at the Hunt mansion flashed up on the monitor now. The water in the pool was stirred ever so slightly by the breeze. Through hidden speakers Ritchie heard the sound of the pool filter humming. Then Cheto walked into the frame and that disk also locked, the image frozen.

"Oh, my God," Ritchie cried. All the Ritchies on the plasma screen loop repeated the plea.

Ritchie played one disk after another: the outside of the Hunt Mansion, the inside of his Dodge pickup truck, the waiting room at the clinic, the exterior of the VirtuaCorp building, the line of slow-moving traffic on the San Diego Freeway...

And the control room in which Ritchie now sat, watching the image of the control room.

He looked up at the giant plasma screen. It now held the same image as the PREVIEW screen; Ritchie sitting there looking up at the big screen.

"This can't be," Ritchie said. "It's fucking impossible."

All the screens in the bank of monitors blinked off at once. The plasma screen went blank, too. Then it flickered back on. It held a picture of the exterior of the Hunt mansion in Brentwood. A woman whom Ritchie did not recognize was standing in front of the gate, a microphone in her hand, staring back at him. The image was in freeze frame. Ritchie looked down at the control panel and saw that the "Pause" button was now flashing at him. He didn't want to touch that button.

He pressed it anyway and the image on the plasma screen jerked into motion.

"Live from Brentwood, the scene of today's terrible murder scene. West Los Angeles police have yet to make any formal statement to the media, but the victim has been unofficially confirmed to be studio executive Jerry Hunt. Hunt has long been a controversial figure in Hollywood, for his extravagant lifestyle and notoriously violent movies, and in no small part, for his recent and very public marriage to former porn star, Honey Dew."

A photograph of Mr and Mrs Hunt replaced the image of the reporter on the screen. It looked as if it must have been a wedding photo, but what kind of wedding could it have been? Mrs Hunt, nee Dew, was wearing white—just barely. Ritchie had never seen a wedding dress quite like it, leaving as it did little for the groom to discover about his bride on the wedding night. It was the perfect companion piece to the bathing suit she hadn't been wearing in Ritchie's dream.

Jerry Hunt, of course, was none other than the dark-haired man.

Ritchie felt the blood freeze in his veins at the sight of him. Those black eyes stared down on Ritchie from the big plasma screen and seemed to bore right through his skull. The photograph of the Hunts was replaced by the image of the female reporter on the scene outside the mansion.

"The murdered executive's wife has reportedly told investigators that her husband became involved in a heated argument with their pool cleaner over a pay claim. The two men got into a fight in which the cleaner was severely beaten by Mr Hunt. Mrs Hunt reported that

the cleaner returned to the house with a gun and shot her husband several times at point blank range. Paramedics were called to the house and responded quickly, but Jerry Hunt was pronounced dead at the scene."

"No," Ritchie said, his hands clutched to the sides of his shaking head. "It's not true. It didn't happen like that. It's not possible."

The image on the big screen switched to a shot of a police car, cherry top flashing, parked in the driveway of the Hunt Mansion. The silhouette of a figure could be seen huddled in the back of the squad car.

"A suspect has reportedly been arrested near the scene, but the assailant's name is being withheld by police pending formal charges. Mrs Hunt is said to be understandably distraught, but is helping police with their inquiries."

The image on the screen shuddered as the cameraman taking the footage clearly started to run toward the parked squad car, the handheld camera shaking as he moved. A uniformed officer lazily tried to ward off the camera, but the cameraman bolted around the back of the car. He jammed the camera against the closed window at the rear of the squad car before being herded back by the policeman. The handcuffed suspect sitting hunched over in the back of the car was only visible for a second or two, but his identity was unmistakable. Not least to himself.

It was Ritchie who sat in the back of that patrol car.

Ritchie who had been arrested for the murder of the Jerry Hunt.

"NO!" he screamed. "It's not true. It's all lies. This can't be real. None of this is happening!"

He slammed his fists down onto the mixing desk, hitting buttons and pulling switches at random. Different monitors lit up and then switched off and various disk drawers and drives opened and closed and whizzed on and off.

The big plasma screen went black. The only remaining sound in the room was the omnipresent hum emanating from the two black boxes against the far wall.

Ritchie lowered his head onto his arms and started to cry. Why were they doing this to him? Why was he being tortured? What in

God's name was his crime?

He heard a noise and looked up. Through the observation window onto the treatment room he saw the door open. The bald receptionist walked in with the lab technician from his dream. His glasses were unbroken and on his nose. The bald woman gestured toward the mirror and the technician pointed straight at Ritchie in the control booth.

Ritchie sat bolt upright.

The technician nodded and began to speak into a small microphone pinned to his lapel.

Ritchie heard an alarm go off.

In a panic he got up and headed for the door. He looked out into the hall and saw that it was still deserted. The sound of the alarm was louder out in the hall. A red light set high up on the wall started to flash.

Ritchie bolted down the hall, past the elevator. Running on instinct, he punched the button, but he did not want to have to go back inside that coffin of a car unless he absolutely had to. He ran to the far end of the hall, picking up speed as he went. As he approached the closed door at the other end, he leapt into the air feet first—a Latino Jet Li—and launched a flying drop kick at the door.

He could feel the impact with the door all the way up into his hip, and was certain he must have broken his ankle. He landed hard on his right hip on the floor, but—

The door flew open.

Ritchie scrambled to his knees, wincing with pain. He could hear voices behind him now and they sounded angry. He crawled through the open doorway then kicked the door closed behind him.

He found himself at the end of another long, white corridor. This one was lined with doors, however. The inside of the VirtuaCorp building was Escher-like in its looping expanse.

He tried the doors one by one, constantly looking back over his shoulder at the closed door at the end of the hall. Every last one of the doors was locked.

He had to keep on moving.

At the far end of the corridor Ritchie came to the last of the locked doors. He thought about drop kicking that one, too, after his success with the previous door. He started back up the hall to get some momentum going when he looked back and saw the first door he came through open up. The technician and the bald lady were there. She pointed at him. The technician yelled his name and started to run down the hall after Ritchie.

Ritchie prepared to kick open the door on his end when it suddenly slipped open in front of him. A man stuck his head out through the part-open door.

Cheto. The gardener.

"Hey, bro!" he called out to Ritchie.

Ritchie shook his head. How could this possibly be?

"Come on, bro, I get you out of this place," Cheto said. He smiled.

It was the same nasty smile Cheto offered Ritchie when he asked him about pool pussy in the dream.

The lab guy was getting closer now, still talking into his lapel.

Ritchie looked at Cheto, who nodded encouragingly at him, then back at the technician.

Frying pan. Fire. Frying pan. Fire.

What to do?

Better the dream devil you know, Ritchie thought. He leapt into the fire.

Cheto grabbed Ritchie by the arm and pulled him through the door. He slammed it shut behind them, then pulled a garden spade from out of a pocket of his coveralls. He flipped it around and smashed apart the digital keypad on their side of the door.

"That'll hold 'em," Cheto laughed. "Motherfuckers think they can pay shit money to Cheto for all the work I do. Screw 'em, I say."

The door led to a narrow stairwell. Cheto went first, taking the steps down two and three at a time. Ritchie, desperate but still confused and feeling cautious, followed Cheto several steps behind. They went down a seemingly impossible number of half-flights before reaching the bottom.

Cheto punched the keypad by the door at the base of the stairs. It clicked open and Cheto held a hand up as in a visual command to

halt. He stuck his head out to have a peek, then shoved the door open and waved for Ritchie to follow him on through.

Another white corridor.

"I know this place better than they do. Come on," Cheto encouraged and he took off down the hall. Gasping for breath now, his head addled, his soul in agony, Ritchie could do nothing but follow along. He was beyond volition now.

"I know a back door," Cheto said, keying in the code to open the lock on a door halfway down the corridor. He turned and offering that oleaginous grin to Ritchie again, said: "But that don't mean I'm no back door man, eh, bro?"

Cheto laughed. It was the sound made by shaking a bag full of broken glass.

Ritchie followed him into a dimly lit room that seemed to be stacked floor to ceiling with cardboard boxes. They stopped while Cheto fumbled with the key code for the exit and Ritchie saw that one of the nearby boxes was open. He took a quick glance inside.

It was filled with stacks of silver discs, just like the ones he had viewed in the control booth. He picked one up and saw that it was labeled: ALECTO V1.04. He didn't have time to examine any of the others; Cheto had finally managed to open the door to the outside garden.

"There you go, bro. Freedom."

Ritchie nodded his thanks and started to go out, but stopped.

"Why are you helping me like this?" he asked.

"He—e—e—e—y," Cheto replied. "Us pool guys got to stick together. Eh, bro?"

Then he shoved Ritchie out the door and closed it behind him.

But you're not a pool guy, Ritchie thought.

Then he was on the move again.

He ran through the garden, turning the wrong way at first and getting lost in the maze of paths that ran behind the house and disappeared on up into the hills. He got himself oriented and used the big stone wall around the property as a guide to edge his way back toward the street. As he came around and caught a view of the front of the house, he saw the entrance door open and the bald

woman emerge. Ritchie ducked down behind a flowering bougainvillea before she could spot him.

No way he could get back out through the main gate. Even if he could be sure of getting the lock open.

He took a long, hard look at the high wall, carefully studied the sharpened spikes on top.

Ritchie swallowed hard; he couldn't see any other way out of the fix other than to try to scale the wall. Looking around, he saw a climbable tree that was out of direct sight of the front door and which just might offer him a little bit of advantage for getting up on top of the wall without impaling himself. He dropped to his knees and crawled through the thick growth of shrubs toward the base of the tree. From there, he was hidden from the front of the house by a wall of tall, blooming jasmine.

Ritchie shimmied up the tree and hauled himself up onto a branch that overhung the wall. He got the best purchase he could, keeping hold of the edge of the wall with one hand, clutching onto the branch with the other. He tucked his legs and got into a crouch, inching out along the branch. He could feel it start to crack beneath his weight.

He'd have to do this quickly.

Ritchie mentally counted to himself, preparing to leap up on top of the wall between two of the nasty spikes. He bounced slightly on his haunches.

One.

Two.

The branch gave way with a shotgun report as Ritchie threw himself into the air. He got his left leg well up onto the wall and grabbed at the base of a spike with his outstretched right hand. His right leg smacked hard against the stone wall and he felt a patch of skin scrape off painfully. He hauled the leg up quickly and grabbed for the outside edge of the wall with his free hand.

He hauled himself up and over, just managing to successfully slip his torso between the imposing spikes. He swung his right leg over, but lost the grip with his sweaty left hand and slipped just a bit.

He felt the tip of the spike tear through the soft skin of his right calf. Blood began to pour out of the gaping wound.

Ritchie howled with pain, but he couldn't stop now. He was almost there. With a last mighty heave, he threw himself over the other side of the wall and landed on the sidewalk in a bloody heap.

"Jesus," he begged. He grabbed at his injured leg.

The big front gate of VirtuaCorp remained shut. They hadn't come out after him. They must not have seen him.

Ritchie took time to study his leg. A big flap of skin had been torn loose and a chunk of meat was missing, too. There was an awful lot of blood and Ritchie could only pray that he hadn't severed any key arteries.

How much blood can you afford to lose before you pass out, he wondered? He looked up.

He was no more than ten steps away from his truck. He bet it had never looked as wonderful to anyone since that distant day when it left the showroom.

"Thank you, Lord," he muttered, and dragged himself and his bleeding leg across the sidewalk and over to his truck. He fumbled the keys out of his pocket and jammed them into the lock. In a second he was behind the wheel, keys in the ignition. Blood continued to pour from his calf, staining the already filthy floor mats a coppery brown.

Ritchie turned the key in the ignition.

Nothing. No response.

"Come on, you mother!" he screamed.

He turned the key again, but the engine didn't respond. He tried a third time and became aware of a shadow that flickered at the periphery of his vision. He ignored it and turned the key over and over. He thought he might snap it off inside the ignition lock.

It was hopeless.

He threw his head back against the rest and realized that someone was now standing outside the driver's side window, just inches away from him. Ritchie didn't want to do it, but he turned his head to the left to look.

The dark-haired man smiled at him. He held up his hand.

Two torn ignition wires dangled from his bony white fingers.

In his other hand he held the big black gun.

"No," Ritchie begged. "Please. I didn't do nothing. Mr Hunt, please, I didn't—"

"Wake up," said the dark haired man.

Impossibly, Ritchie heard the sick, squishy sound made by the impact of his splattered brains against the dirty passenger window of his ugly old Dodge.

TEN

Ritchie shot bolt upright in bed.

"Holy shit!" he said. "Holy, holy, holy, holy."

He quickly ran his fingers across the side of his head, breathed a massive sigh of relief when the only hole he found there was the requisite and expected cavity leading into his ear.

"How much more?" he muttered, eyes closed, his chin dropping to his chest.

He opened his eyes again, heart beating in double-time.

Something was most definitely not right here.

Nervously, he raised his chin off his chest and looked around; nothing at all was right here.

This was *not* his bedroom. Ritchie Almares had not woken up from this latest dream in his own bed. Or rather—he had not woken up in his current bed.

The room was deeply familiar to him, of course. And well it should be, for he had awakened in the bedroom in which he had slept every night for years. It was the bedroom of his childhood house in West Covina, east of downtown LA. Ritchie held his hands up in front of his face, looked down his prone body.

He was still in the body he had fallen asleep in, the body of a thirty-seven year-old man.

But there he was: in the single bed—with original Chewbacca the Wookie sheets, no less; and how much must those be worth today?—of Ritchie Almares the eleven year-old boy. The walls of his room were adorned with magazine photos and comic book covers featuring scenes and characters from *Star Wars* and *Battlestar Galactica* and *Howard the Duck* and all his other childhood favorites. The floor on one side of the bed was a battlefield landscape littered with casualties from his vast collection of plastic soldiers. Another corner offered up a demolition derby of Hot Wheels racing cars, mixed and matched in various tableaux of vehicular carnage. A stinky pair of red Pro Keds, laces tied together, dangled from one of the bedposts, a pair of filthy

tube socks jammed inside. They wouldn't even begin to fit the hairy adult feet that hung over the end of the too short bed.

On the pillow beside him was the rattiest imaginable stuffed toy: a ragged, brown and white puppy with one eye missing and tufts of cotton stuffing spilling out of a no-longer-repairable gash in its stubby tail.

Checkers was the dog's name and his father had bought it for him. It had been his favorite toy and sleeping companion from when he was a baby. Checkers mysteriously vanished one day about the time of Ritchie's twelfth birthday. Ritchie always suspected that his mother had thrown Checkers away. She made it clear to him that he was far too old for such things and Checkers had grown even rattier by then, though she vehemently denied it. under cross-examination. Ritchie had been inconsolable over the loss. Even as an adult it made him feel sad to think about it.

He picked Checkers up and gave the dog a big hug. He closed his eyes as he pressed the lovely old toy to his cheek. Ritchie had to fight back some tears.

The door to his room flew open.

"Ritchie, Ritchie, Ritchie!"

His four year-old brother Armando came running into the room and leaped up onto the bed at his feet. He had a goofy smile on his face and seemed not to notice that the Ritchie whose legs. he scampered over was a grown man he didn't know and not his slightly bigger brother. Ritchie remembered then how Armando always used to wake up before he did every day and rushed into the kitchen to eat a bowl of Cap'n Crunch before anyone else in the house had so much as stirred. Then he would come charging into the bedroom to get Ritchie out of bed. Just as he was doing now.

Armando was supposed to sleep in the bedroom with Ritchie as the West Covina house wasn't very big, but he insisted on sleeping in their parents' bedroom. Their father hated being disturbed by Armando, who was a flailier in bed, and the sleeping arrangement was a constant source of tension between his parents.

One of many, Ritchie recalled too readily. He had forgotten a great deal about those days, a lot of those memories buried for good

reason.

"Time to wake up, time to wake," Armando urged.

"This is just a dream, little brother," Ritchie told him. But Armando seemed not to hear. He didn't pay attention to Ritchie's words in any case. He just continued to jump up and down, that goofy grin growing wider on his happy, little boy's face.

"Come on, come on, come on," Armando insisted.

Ritchie remembered now. He remembered how Armando would do this to him every morning, long before Ritchie actually needed to get up for school. Ritchie just wanted to sleep, to be left alone, but the little boy simply couldn't bear to wait for his big brother to wake up because—damn it!—it was morning of a fresh day and he wanted to play.

Ritchie was always annoyed by his little brother. The more he thought about it, the more he recalled what a real pest Armando had been. Armando had been a real whiner. He cried when he didn't get his way over the slightest thing. Ritchie, the big boy, was always expected to make concessions to accommodate his wimpy younger brother. Everyone in the family, especially his mother, naturally expected it of him. It was part of the responsibility of being the firstborn. It had made him angry and resentful toward the younger Almaraes.

"Go away, Armando," Ritchie told his brother.

The little boy just started jumping even harder. He scooted up the bed and began to perform his trampoline antics on Ritchie's stomach. He did it every morning and it hurt!

"Armando, beat it!" Ritchie warned.

The little boy just laughed all the harder.

The past played out more clearly to Ritchie now. He recalled all the annoying things that Armando used to do, the vast range of injustices that Ritchie had been forced to endure for the sake of his brother: the missed little league games, the beloved television shows he couldn't watch, the extra spinach he had to eat because Armando wouldn't eat his and food was not going to be wasted in his father's house. Oh, no!

And that daily morning wake-up routine. Being shocked out of a sound sleep and pounced on in bed every single day.

Ritchie slapped his younger brother across the side of his face with the back of his hand.

Armando went flying off the bed and smacked his head against the corner of an open dresser drawer. The little boy immediately started to howl with pain.

"Shut up, man, you're gonna wake mom and dad," Ritchie said.

Armando started to scream now.

"Yo, Armando! You gotta shut up, boy, or you're gonna wake..."

Too late. Ritchie could hear his father's heavy footsteps thundering down the hall towards the bedroom. Their father was a drinking man and did not much care for mornings at the best of times. Ritchie remembered all too well the typically awful consequences of waking the old man up too early when he was burdened with a hangover.

A childhood pang of terror spread out from his tummy.

"Monsters!" he heard the old man scream from the hallway. He could also hear his mother chattering along behind her husband, trying to calm him down. It never worked.

Ritchie rolled off the bed and tried to silence his brother by clasping a hand over his open, screaming mouth. Armando was crying and drooling long strands of saliva from his quivering lips. A trickle of blood spilled down from the side of his head where he had cracked his noggin against the dresser drawer.

The sound of their father's approach grew louder, along with their mother's pathetic cries. Ritchie remembered then, while still trying to forcefully silence the little boy, how this had been the very beginning of the long and slow demise of his good relationship with Armando. The two had fought more and more as they got bigger and the years went by, with Ritchie bullying his adoring younger brother to ever more extreme degrees, right up to the time that Ritchie left home, fleeing his alcoholic father at the age of seventeen. He and his brother had never been close again after that time. Though Armando still lived nearby—just in Glendale on the other side of the Hollywood Hills—Ritchie had not so much as seen his brother or spoken to him on the telephone for more than five years.

But this was the past and all that was still in front of him. Ritchie felt very scared now, holding his brother's bleeding head with one

hand and still trying to gag his cries with the other.

Their father stormed into the room.

Somehow Ritchie wasn't the slightest bit surprised to see that it was the dark-haired man who stormed into the room wearing his daddy's tattered bathrobe and slippers, and speaking in his father's gravelly voice.

"What are you doing to your brother?" he said. His father had the dark-haired man's eyes and they were ablaze.

Ritchie shook his head. "Nothing," he replied.

"I'll nothing you, you no-good—"

"Juan! No," his mother screamed. It was Doctor Rosoff, wearing his mother's frilly old housecoat and fluffy slippers.

"This can't be happening!" Ritchie sobbed.

"You should have thought of that before," Daddy/dark-haired man boomed.

He picked Ritchie up by the collar and lifted him off the ground, as if he really were just a smallish, eleven year-old boy.

"Daddy, please no!" Ritchie cried. How many times had he said it for real at that age? Too many to count.

The dark-haired man hurled Ritchie through the closed bedroom window. He felt shards of glass pierce his skin as he flew through the air. He landed painfully in a rose bush in their front garden, too dazed to move.

The dark-haired man climbed right on out through the broken window, seething anger contorting his horrid face. He had the big black gun in his hand now.

"Shoot him, Daddy, shoot him!" Armando urged. "He's a bad brother."

"Hit a little boy, will you?" the daddy monster screamed. "Torture your baby brother?"

"Juan! Is too much," Doctor Rosoff/Mommy begged.

The dark-haired man backhanded Ritchie under the chin and he went tumbling across their overgrown front lawn. The dark-haired man was immediately on him again, brutally kicking him in the stomach. A window opened in the house next door. Ritchie, spitting blood, looked up and remembered the face of their neighbor, Mrs

Ramirez. She'd always hated Ritchie for losing his ball in her yard and damaging her flowers.

"That's the way, Juan," she shouted. "It's about time that boy learned his lesson!"

The dark-haired man waved to the neighbor and smiled. He stormed over to Ritchie and pressed the gun against Ritchie's forehead.

"Bad boy," he scolded.

He pulled the trigger.

Ritchie shot bolt upright in bed.

It wasn't his bed.

Only it was.

"Kill me now, God. Please just kill me now," he begged.

Ritchie whimpered. He didn't want to, but he looked around and all too quickly recognized his surroundings. It was his bedroom again, but not the one in Palms. Nor the childhood bedroom from which he'd just been defenestrated. In fact, it wasn't strictly speaking his bedroom, though it was one in which he slept most every night. Technically speaking, it belonged to his old girlfriend, Irene.

Irene was there. Asleep right next to him.

It was Irene who rented the little apartment in Mar Vista. It was a rat hole, really, with a leak in the ceiling and roaches in the kitchen. But Ritchie was out of work and she couldn't afford anything better on her secretary's wages. The two of them lived like pigs in the tiny place, though Irene did make an effort; she just couldn't keep up with Ritchie's slovenly and disinterested ways. Irene adored and worshipped Ritchie and would have done anything for him. She was convinced that he was the greatest and only love of her life.

Ritchie thought Irene was okay. Most of the time. She was, in any case, the first really serious girlfriend he'd ever had. She was the first girl he had ever lived with and had made an effort to make a go of things with her as a "couple."

Ritchie wasn't too sure he cared for the whole idea of it, to be honest. He did like his freedom.

But Irene was decent looking, with a killer ass, and she pretty well did whatever Ritchie asked of her in bed, including one or two things that none of his other girlfriends would even consider. Irene paid the rent and did the shopping and cooked the meals and was always around when there was nothing else to do. She had a really nice TV, too. And cable with all the movie channels.

His attitude was: he could do a lot worse.

"Irene," he said, marveling at the fact of being where he was.

He woke her up. She smiled at him and threw her arms around him for a cuddle, as she did every morning. No one, other than Checkers maybe, had ever been so happy to wake up next to Ritchie. Every morning was like love at first sight for Irene.

God, how he'd hated that.

Ritchie liked his space; he always had. If he wanted a hug, he would let her know. But she was always all over him, getting in his face and practically drooling into his mouth.

"Not now," he complained, and pushed her away.

She continued to smile at him, oblivious. "Good morning, darling," she said.

"This is impossible, Irene," Ritchie said.

"What have I done wrong now?" she said, cowed. The smile evaporated from her lips.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head. "You don't understand. It's not... I've been having these dreams."

"Tell me about them," she said, perking up again. She always loved it when he talked to her about the most mundane things. It was another thing that seriously used to annoy him about her.

"They're terrible dreams. Awful. And it's like I can't wake up from them," he began. "It started... Jeez, I don't even know any more. But it's not from now. I mean, I'm not really here now anyway and..."

He was so confused himself, how could he explain it? What, after all, was the point? He knew that this, too, had to be a dream, but he couldn't help but live in the moment of it. Ritchie simply. didn't

know up from down, left from right now. He was in free fall without being able to see the earth below him.

"I'm not supposed to be here," was what he finally said. "It's not right. Do you understand?"

"You're going to leave me!" Irene cried. It was her deepest fear and she voiced it constantly to Ritchie when he expressed the slightest unhappiness about anything to her.

Which was quite often.

"For the love of... Irene," he groaned.

"You can't leave me, Ritchie. You can't do it. You know that I can't live without you."

"You're driving me crazy, Irene. I hate it when you talk shit like this. You know how much I hate it. So why do you do it to me time and time again? Do you know? Why?"

She was starting to tear up now; little sobs wracked her slight frame.

"Irene..." he warned.

"There's something you have to know, Ritchie," she said. "Something I have to tell you."

He felt a tightness form in his chest. A memory bubbled up in him from deep in the past. Something about this morning, something that she told him and what he then did.

"It's why you can't leave me. It's so very, very important."

"Don't say it, Irene," Ritchie told her. The memory was growing, filling up his muddled head. "I'm begging you, please."

"I'm pregnant, Ritchie," she said. "I've got your baby in me and it's growing inside of me. I'm going to give birth to your child. Your son."

"No," he said. "No way. I am not ready for that shit."

That was just what he needed. Tied down for life with Irene and a screaming brat. A little monster who whined and moaned and cried just like his little brother. The rest of his life: a miserable one bedroom/one bath life with this halfwit of a secretary and her brat and nothing to look forward to but cheap beers at the bar on a Friday night, just like...

Just like his father.

"It ain't gonna happen, Irene," Ritchie told her. "No fucking way."

"What do you mean?" she said. "It already has. It's in here."

She sat up and thrust her belly out at him, lifting up her nightshirt. Her tummy didn't look any bigger or rounder so he knew she couldn't be *very* pregnant. Which meant there was still time. Things could still be done.

"I ain't ready for no babies, Irene. It won't happen. Do you understand?"

She was shaking her head. She ran her hands over her still-flat stomach.

"It has happened, Ritchie and it's wonderful, a miracle. We're going to have a baby and we're going to be happy together. Forever."

"No," he insisted.

"Yes!" she smirked.

God how he hated it when she smirked. He hadn't planned it, didn't know where it came from, how it happened.

He hauled off and punched her as hard as he possibly could, square in the abdomen.

She went tumbling off the bed and landed in a heap on the floor. She screamed in agony.

"No—o—o—o—o," she cried.

Then someone began pounding on the door.

"Irene! You all right, sweetie? Irene!"

This wasn't right. He didn't remember this happening.

But then he did. It was on a different day and in a different place, but the voice, the pounding on the door.

Irene's brother. A two hundred and fifty pound bruiser named Frank who worked down at the docks in San Pedro. He'd never liked Ritchie in the first place and had come looking for him after...

But now it was all happening at once. It hadn't been like this then. Had it? Ritchie was so confused.

The door burst open and Frank stormed in, mad as hell. He was big as a fridge with arms as thick around as tree trunks.

And wavy black hair and dead little eyes.

The dark-haired man, of course.

"What have you done to my baby sister?" he said.

He reached out and grabbed Ritchie by the hair, physically lifting him off the bed with one massive arm. Ritchie yelled. Frank threw his other arm back and then brought his fist forward with all his might into Ritchie nose. It connected with a very loud *CRUUUNCH!*

Ritchie slammed backwards into the wall. Blood spurted out from the cavity in the middle of his face.

The dark-haired man/Frank came forward again and grabbed Ritchie's by the throat with both hands. He started to choke him for all he was worth.

"That's my little sister, asshole!" he screamed.

Ritchie couldn't breathe, couldn't make a noise. His throat and larynx had been crushed and his lungs were aching for air, burning for it. Ritchie felt his eyes bulging out of his head as one of his eardrums popped. He tried frantically to break the big man's grip, but he could barely lift his arms for the effort. He flailed helplessly as Frank choked the remaining life out of him. Frank's thin lips arched back in a nasty smile, his tiny sharp teeth the last thing that Ritchie saw before he—

Shot bolt upright. But not in bed.

He had dozed off, can you believe it? Sitting in the cab of his pick-up truck, waiting, he had dozed right off. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? It wasn't as if he didn't get enough sleep or like he had to be up at the crack of dawn to get to work or something.

No, that was just the problem; lack of work. The pool guy business had suddenly gone into the dumper. He'd squeaked by, making a living—if you wanted to call it that—cleaning pools for years, just sort of hanging in there. But suddenly it had all gone south on Ritchie.

He hadn't been able to figure it at first. He had managed to put together a string of pretty regular customers who seemed happy with the quality of his work. They kept him on from season to season and he even managed to pick up a little new business by way of word of mouth. That couldn't be bad, could it? If your customers were recommending you, you had to be doing something right?

Didn't you?

But then all of a sudden, out of the blue, his customers were starting to drop him. No one would ever give him a real reason why either; they would just say they were cutting back or they didn't need him anymore or they'd found someone else.

And that's when he discovered someone was dogging his business, stealing his customers away from right under his nose.

Ritchie had decided to play Hardy Boy and do a little investigating. Sure enough, he discovered that each of the clients who had dropped him had signed up with the same new service provider: The Pool Gal.

Honest to god, that's what she called herself. He was the Pool Guy—it said so on his truck—and she was the Pool Gal. She didn't even have the originality to come up with her own goddamn name.

Ritchie couldn't believe it. What a low thing to do, steal someone's livelihood right out from under them. Wasn't life tough enough without having to endure crap like that? And from some bitch to boot?

It was the proverbial icing on the shit-cream cake that life had served Ritchie Almares.

So he followed her one day. Tracked the Pool Gal as she went from house to house—his houses, his pools—doing the business.

And right away he saw why it was that she got all the work.

The Pool Gal was five feet eleven inches of suntanned flesh and long, golden blonde hair. She drove around and cleaned the pools in a French bikini that was a damned sight easier on the eyes than Ritchie's torn T-shirts, black shorts and plastic flip-flops. He didn't know if she was undercutting his prices, but reckoned that she didn't need to look like she did. Hell, she probably didn't even have to do a very good job cleaning the pools with those legs and those tits. Ritchie imagined that more than a few homeowners would live with the extra leaves floating on the top of the water and the misbalanced PH levels, for the sake of watching the Pool Gal bend over their filter.

He knew he would.

It made him good and mad though. Mad at that big blonde bitch for taking what was his. Mad at the unfairness of a world in which he could no longer even get by doing the one two-bit, meager job he was

half decent at. Mad at the lack of drive and initiative and ability that left him as vulnerable as he was.

And downright furious—with himself, with the world, with the *universe*—for being a miserable, worthless failure and a hump at the not so ripe old age of thirty-seven.

So Ritchie decided he deserved some revenge for all that injustice.

He followed the Pool Gal all that day. And the next day. And the next one after that. She had a very regular route, better than any he'd ever put together, which led back to her neat house in Silver Lake. Silver Lake was a big gay area. He should have known; the bitch was probably a carpet muncher, too! What would those customers drooling over her ass think about that? (They'd probably pay even more, he guessed sadly.) In any case, her place was perfect for his plan. She lived in a prim little place at the end of a quiet road, shielded by wildly overgrown vegetation. The Pool Gal wasn't big on gardening.

So he went to Silver Lake that afternoon. He made sure that he got to her house well ahead of her. He'd noticed on his previous surveillance runs that she always left an upstairs window open in the house while she was out. Ritchie took a careful look and thought he could get in that window if he tried.

He was right.

He heard her van pull up into the driveway, heard the door slam shut. The key rattled in the lock of her front door and she walked into her house in her French bikini.

Ritchie, standing behind the front door, slammed her across the back of her pretty blonde head with an electric iron. He'd already cut the cord off with a kitchen knife and he used that to tie her hands behind her back. Tight as he could.

The Pool Gal moaned. She was dazed and bleary but not entirely out of it.

Perfect. She'd be able to enjoy it all the more then.

Ritchie grabbed her under the arms and dragged her into the bedroom. She was big and heavy, but his adrenaline rush had given him strength he hadn't known. He'd never been so excited in his life.

He threw her face-down on the bed and she let out a pained cry. He tore off her bikini bottom and pulled down his shorts.

Oh, yeah. He was more than ready for this.

The Pool Gal started to scream as he brutally entered her. He hadn't been prepared for that, and he had left the iron by the front door. He slipped out of her as she started to buck and squirm, to fight back. He saw the beaten metal bedside lamp on the night table. That would do, he thought. He grabbed it around the neck and raised it up to smash her in the head with it.

The Pool Gal had managed to flip herself over. Ritchie looked down at her perfect body.

And the grinning face of the dark-haired man.

"Lord have mercy," he whispered.

The dark-haired man/Pool Gal reached out with a now free and very masculine hand and grabbed tight hold of Ritchie's testicles.

He/she squeezed and Ritchie screamed.

Ritchie heard one pop then another as the vice-like grip tightened.

He looked down and saw something wet and red go sliding down the inside of his thigh.

He—

Shot bolt upright in bed.

He took in the scene around him. He was in his own bedroom again. In Palms. At age thirty-seven.

At least, he was pretty sure.

He heard someone walking down the hall.

"Leonard?" he called out, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Leonard brushed his knuckles against the door as he eased it open and stuck his head in.

"You say something?" he asked.

"Uhhhh," Ritchie said.

"Are you okay, Ritchie? You're looking a little weird today, man. Que pasa?"

"I'm having kind of a tough morning," Ritchie told him. "What day is it, Leonard?"

"It's Thursday," Leonard said. He laughed. "You expecting a different answer than that?"

"Nope, Thursday's good with me. I can do Thursday."

"Oh. Well. Good. I mean, I don't know what you can do about it if it isn't. Go back to sleep, I suppose."

"No, no!" Ritchie said. "I definitely do not want to do that."

"I got to get to work, Ritchie. Sale starts in the store today," Leonard said.

"Okay," Ritchie said.

"Umm, I sort of hate to mention this," Leonard started.

"Rent's due," Ritchie said. "I know all about it. It's on the list. Believe me, it's imprinted on my brain."

"Cool," Leonard say, nodding. "I'd better go."

"Leonard!" Ritchie called out.

Leonard poked his head back through the door, raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"Has the mail come yet this morning?" Ritchie asked.

"Yeah, it just came through the slot. Nothing for you, though. Just the usual bills and credit card offers and junk mail. I got a postcard from my aunt. She's in Reno again. Gonna lose my inheritance there, I swear."

"You sure there's nothing for me?"

Leonard shrugged. "Yeah, man, just what I told you. You expecting something important? You know how the post office sucks these days."

"No," Ritchie said, shaking his head. "I'm not looking for anything. I don't want a thing."

Leonard looked confused. "I've really got to go now, Ritchie. You sure everything's all right? You look a little bit spaced."

"Life's a dream, bro," Ritchie told him.

"Okay, whatever. Later then."

And Leonard took off. Ritchie heard the front door slam. Ritchie just lay there in bed. Waiting.

He wasn't sure what he was waiting for, but he felt certain that whatever it was, it would come as surely as the night. It would probably be the Dark-Haired Man with his gun. But who could say?

Ritchie just lay there in his bed for a full hour. Every car that drove by, every bird that tweeted, every creak from the old lady upstairs and kids shouting in the street made him jump. Made his heart skip a beat and sweat bead on his lip. He expected death at any second. At every second. Maybe it would be his brains on the window or his balls in a blender, but death would come. Oh, yeah.

So he waited. But nothing came.

"Fuck it," Ritchie said as morning moved into afternoon. "If the mountain won't come to Mohammed..."

He got dressed—shorts, T-shirt, flip-flops—and got into his truck. The engine turned over first time. Traffic was unusually light on the route up into the Valley. He was through the Cahuenga Pass and onto the Ventura Freeway in record time. The Tarzana exit was on him before he knew it and he had to cut across two lanes of traffic in order not to miss it.

"Too easy," he told himself, shaking his head.

Without even needing to look at the map, he followed the exact same route he had taken last time. When was that exactly? Was it yesterday? Last night? Tomorrow? Was it in a dream or in the real world? Was there a real world or was everything and everyone just another dream?

He didn't know anymore. He couldn't tell.

He was turning into a proper fucking philosopher, though.

He wound his way through Tarzana and up into the residential district in the hills. He found Beaumont Avenue without any problem and drove down to the very end of the road. It all looked perfectly familiar to him from his previous visit, with one considerable exception. The big Victorian house belonging to and containing VirtuaCorp was not where it had been.

No gingerbread gables, no high fence with razor-sharp spikes, no big gate.

No nothing.

At the number belonging to the VirtuaCorp headquarters he found a handsome and modern, but quite modest and utterly innocuous-looking ranch house. There was fence around it, but it was white picket and no more than two feet high. Blackberries grew between the fence posts. An old-fashioned mailbox on a painted pole stood at the entrance to a cobbled path leading to the front door. The little red flag on the mailbox was up. The name on the side of the mailbox read: *Shapiro*.

Ritchie walked up the path without a moment's hesitation. Two large pots of white geraniums adorned both sides of the front door. Ritchie rang the bell.

At first he thought no one was at home, but then he heard a clomping sound from inside and a hoarse voice called: "Coming already!"

A small, white-haired woman in a white pants suit opened the door. She wore large tortoise-shell glasses and walked with the aid of an awkward metal frame. It explained the clomping sound.

"Hello," she said. She had the voice of a lifelong, forty-a-day smoker.

"Hi," Ritchie said.

"Can I help you, young man?" she asked.

"This might sound a little peculiar," he began.

"Who's to know what's peculiar these days? It's one heck of a strange world."

"Yeah," Ritchie had to agree.

"So what can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for someplace called VirtuaCorp. I was given this address, but I... don't think this can be the right place."

The old woman took her hands off the handle of the walking frame and placed them on her hips. "Now, isn't that funny?" she exclaimed.

"What's that, ma'am?"

"Do you know that I never heard that name VirtuaCorp before just this very morning?"

"How's that, ma'am?" Ritchie asked.

"It's such an odd name, isn't it? That's why it struck such a chord."

"What did? How do you know VirtuaCorp?"

"Would you like to come in, young man?" she asked.

"Ritchie," he told her. "My name is Ritchie."

"Come in, Ritchie. I'm Gertie Shapiro."

She turned around and clomped down the hall. Ritchie followed along behind her, taking baby steps in order not to walk into her. She led him into a pristine living room, all in white. The expensive-looking and exceedingly ugly furniture was all covered in plastic.

"Do sit down," she said.

Ritchie sat on the laminated sofa. It was extremely uncomfortable and the plastic emitted a fart-like sound every time he moved on it. Gertie was clearly used to it.

"Would you care for something to drink? Some iced-tea, maybe?"

"No thank you, ma'am."

"A Coke?"

"No. Thank you," he said and smiled. "VirtuaCorp. You were going to tell me about where you heard of it."

"Oh, yes," she said, sitting down on a plastic-covered easy chair. Fart. "It's quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

"What is?" he asked. He was getting annoyed now.

"Well, like I say, I'd never heard of it before an hour ago. There's never been anyone by that name at this address. I should know, we've live here for over twenty years. My husband and I, I mean."

"Uh-huh," Ritchie encouraged.

"Then this morning a large envelope arrived. It was addressed to this VirtuaCorp. At exactly this address. Zip code and all. Even those extra numbers at the end which I never know from."

"You don't say."

"Yes," she laughed. "I do, I do."

Ritchie smiled and nodded. He asked: "Do you think I could maybe look at that letter?"

"I don't see why not," she told him. "I was just going to put it in the trash, but my husband said we should give it back to the mailman tomorrow. He's a real stickler, my Artie. Do you know these VirtuaCorp people?"

"I... have some business with them," Ritchie said. "A lot of business at the moment."

"Then I'll go and get it," Gertie told him.

Slowly, slowly, using the frame for leverage, she eased herself up off the chair. She clomped her way across the room and back out into the hall. Ritchie would have liked to use the frame to beat her to death.

He sat quietly on the sofa until she returned.

"Here it is," she trilled. She inched her way across the room and handed the large manila envelope to Ritchie.

It was, indeed, addressed with a laser-printed label to VirtuaCorp at that street address in Tarzana. The envelope had been franked and not stamped, but the franking was blurred. There was no return address.

"Would you mind if I opened this up?" Ritchie politely asked.

"My husband the stickler would say no, but he's having his nap," Gertie said. "Why don't you just go ahead?"

Ritchie turned the envelope over and carefully unsealed the flap. He lifted it up and peered inside. He saw a folded sheet of paper inside.

Gently he slid it out and opened it up.

It was a photocopy of the newspaper front page that had been stuck on his windshield in... was it the first of this endless cascade of dreams? He couldn't remember anymore. The headline, which he did remember all too well, screamed: *Savage Murder of Studio Boss Stuns Hollywood—Killer Sought*.

The large photograph below the headline was a glossy studio shot of Jerry Hunt, the dark-haired man.

Ritchie nodded with a remarkable degree of stoicism and acceptance. He really wasn't even surprised now.

"Is that all right then, dear?" Gertie asked.

Ritchie nodded and stared at the photo. As he did so, the figure in it came to life. The dark-haired man on the page raised his eyes to look at Ritchie and his wavy hair billowed in some non-existent breeze.

Somehow Ritchie knew exactly what was coming next.

"Wake up," the dark-haired man said.

Ritchie lowered the piece of paper. Gertie Shapiro lifted up her walking frame and it morphed into a pair of automatic machine pistols.

The old lady shot screaming hot death into Ritchie's convulsing body at a cool thirty rounds per second.

She was laughing all the way.

ELEVEN

Ritchie didn't want to open his eyes. He couldn't face it. Not again, not anymore.

He surrendered; he had had enough.

WHAM! WHAM! WHAM!

A pounding on his bedroom door.

"Ritchie! Yo, Ritchie," Leonard called from out in the hall.

Ritchie opened his eyes. He was back in his bedroom in Palms, everything looking as normal as it should for early on a Thursday morning. If that's what it was. And if not? Well, he'd soon find out, wouldn't he?

"Please let this be the end," Ritchie pleaded. To whom he made this cry, he couldn't really have said. But he added another deeply despairing, "Please."

"Ritchie! Wake up, man. For the love of... Are you in there or what?" Leonard called.

Ritchie forced himself to sit up in bed. He ritualistically examined himself for bullet holes, gaping wounds, leaking brains and mashed testicles.

He appeared to be intact. In the purely physical sense, at least. Mentally and emotionally he felt like a little glass ornament of a man who had fallen off a high shelf onto the hard floor and been shattered to bits, only to be messily superglued back together. With only the slightest bit of mishandling and his delicate shell would crumble to pieces again.

"Ritchie!" Leonard insisted.

"Yeah," Ritchie croaked. He realized that Leonard could not possibly have heard him. He cleared his throat and called out again: "Yeah. Come in, Leonard."

Leonard was fully dressed this morning, looking ready to head out to work. Already pinned to the lapel of his brown corduroy sport jacket was the tag with the Computer Cosmos logo and the smiley face with the word balloon announcing: "Hi! I'm Lenny." Leonard was wearing black shoes with brown socks. He was carrying his

morning copy of *The Los Angeles Times* in his hand. Leonard had it delivered to the door every day; he liked to read it with his breakfast. Leonard lived for Dilbert.

"Man, there is just no end to this," Ritchie sobbed.

"What?" Leonard said. "What are you talking about?"

"It's these dreams," Ritchie said, clutching at the sides of his head. He started pulling at his hair then raked his cheeks with his fingernails. Leonard gaped at him, open-mouthed.

"Huh?" Leonard said.

"They just keep coming and coming," Ritchie started. He wasn't even looking at Leonard. His thousand yard stare was centered somewhere over Leonard's shoulder, at someplace in the past—or the future—where the world still made sense and dreams ended and days began the way they should.

And you didn't get blown to bits by some wicked son of a bitch with deathly eyes.

"Who keeps coming?" Leonard asked. He suddenly seemed very wary of Ritchie.

"Dreams, man. It's my dreams. Just when I think I'm awake and everything is real again and all right again. *Blam!* It just goes on, don't you see?"

"I'm not following you, Ritchie," Leonard said. "What are you trying to tell me?"

Ritchie shook his head. "It doesn't matter. No matter what I say or do, I just end up back in the same nightmare. Every damn time. It's like there's no escape for me, no place to run. Huh! How do you run away from yourself, Leonard? Can you tell me that?"

"Why do you need to run, Ritchie?" Leonard asked. He took a step back away from the foot of the bed towards the door to the bedroom. "Is something wrong? What have you done?"

"That's just it, don't you see?" Ritchie demanded. "What *have* I done? Why am I going through this? Who the hell is doing it to me, that's what I want to know."

"I'm still not sure what you're talking about, man, but it doesn't have anything to do with this, does it?" Leonard asked. He tossed the

morning paper on Ritchie's bed and then took another step back in the direction of the door. Leonard was looking very worried now.

Ritchie reached down and picked up the newspaper. He already knew what it was he was destined to read on the front page, but he carefully unfolded it anyway.

"*Savage Murder of Studio Boss Stuns Hollywood: Killer Sought*", read the big headline. The words now played on a loop inside Ritchie's head like some chart-topping pop tune. Underneath the headline was the huge photograph of Jerry Hunt.

The dark-haired man.

Ritchie stared long and hard at the photograph, expecting it to come to life and leer at him, mock him, tell him to "wake up" before somehow killing him. Maybe Leonard would turn into a Samurai warrior and lop his head off with a big sword. Or a butter knife. Or...

Nothing happened. It was just a photograph on the front page of the daily newspaper. Ritchie couldn't help but let out a phlegmatic laugh.

"Yo, Ritchie. What's funny?" Leonard asked cautiously. "Isn't that the dude you clean pools for? The big studio guy you said owes you all that money?"

"Tell me, Lenny: am I awake?" Ritchie asked. He tossed the newspaper on the floor beside the bed. "You and me talking here, is this for real now? Or is it just another dream, another nightmare?"

"Did you read the article, Ritchie?" Leonard asked. "It says they're looking for someone for the murder. A cleaner. Who are they looking for? Do you know?"

"This isn't happening," Ritchie said, closing his eyes and shaking his head. "This isn't happening, this isn't happening."

"Ritchie, what do you know about this?" Leonard asked. "Were you there? Didn't you go to clean his pool yesterday? You told me you were supposed to collect some money for the rent, didn't you?"

"I have got to wake up, Lenny," Ritchie pleaded. "I've got to find some way to break the chain and wake myself up. For real."

Leonard picked the newspaper up from the floor and gently unfolded it again. He held the front page up for Ritchie to look at it. He pointed at the big picture of the late Jerry Hunt.

"Ritchie," Leonard said, "did you kill this guy? Did you do it?"

"Lenny!" Ritchie sobbed.

"Did you kill Mr Jerry Hunt?" Leonard demanded.

"Please, no," Ritchie cried. "Don't do this to me. Not again."

"You *did* kill him, didn't you?" Leonard said.

"I—"

Then they both heard a pounding noise coming from the front door of the apartment.

"Police!" they heard a booming voice call. "This is the Los Angeles Police Department. Open the door immediately."

"You did kill him," Leonard hissed.

"Help me, Lenny, please!" Ritchie begged. "Cover me! Just this one more month. I need you to cover me."

He threw himself off the bed at Leonard's feet. He grabbed his roommate around the ankles and hung on for dear life. Leonard tried to shake him loose as the pounding on the front door became ever more persistent.

"Get off me, you goddamn murderer," Leonard yelled. He leveled short kicks at Ritchie's fingers and head until Ritchie had to let go. Leonard yanked open the bedroom door and took off down the hall, heading for the front door. He started to shout: "He's in here, he's in here!"

Ritchie heard the front door to the apartment get kicked open and a flurry of excited voices calling to each other. Footsteps began to pound their way down the hall.

Time was running out.

Ritchie stared at his bedroom door. He rolled across the floor to it, kicked it shut and shot the bolt to lock it just as the sound of the footsteps arrived outside. Fists beat on the door and angry voices demanded to be let in.

Ritchie scooted backwards on his ass across the floor. He bumped into the frame of the bed then redirected himself towards the window. The cops were seriously attacking the door now, forcing it open.

"No," Ritchie insisted. "It's not me. It's not real. It's a dream, it's all just a dream."

The door burst open and two uniformed policemen tumbled in. They both wore police caps and had their guns drawn and held out in front of them, just like on TV.

They were both the dark-haired man.

"NO!" Ritchie screamed.

He leapt up and dived out the open window.

Ritchie felt himself flying. His bedroom was on the second floor of the building. What had he been thinking of, jumping out the window?

He landed in the driver's seat of his pick-up truck.

"What?" Ritchie asked.

He was motoring along the Santa Monica Freeway and making good time. He had a super-sized Diet Coke wedged between his legs, the cold plastic cup feeling nice against his thighs. It was another hot Los Angeles day.

"What am I doing here?" Ritchie said to himself. His thoughts were jumbled, his head in a fog. The events in his bedroom were already forgotten. But where was he going?

The Hunt mansion, he suddenly remembered. He was on his way to the Hunt place to clean the pool and he was going to be late. That wouldn't do. Mr Hunt went bonkers every time that Ritchie was even five minutes late arriving. He needed to get there and get the job done. Mr Hunt was supposed to pay him today and Ritchie needed that money. Leonard. The rent.

Ritchie had to have that cash. He couldn't give Hunt an excuse to dick him around today.

He stepped hard on the gas and watched the speedometer needle head toward eighty. There was amazingly little traffic on the freeway this afternoon; it must be Ritchie's lucky day.

A police siren sounded behind him.

"Awww, man," Ritchie moaned.

So much for his lucky day.

He glanced in the rear-view, and saw the spinning cherry top of the California Highway Patrol car coming up fast on his rear. Then he looked again and saw that there were two of them.

No, three.

Three squad cars to chase one slightly speeding pick-up truck? That seemed just a bit excessive. Surely LA's finest had bigger fish to fry?

Ritchie stepped down harder on the gas pedal. They couldn't possibly be after him. Not three cop cars. They must be on their way someplace else. He'd just go a little faster to get out of their way.

He glanced up again into the rear-view mirror and saw that three more cars had joined the chase. All three lanes of the freeway were filled with patrol cars now, sirens blaring and lights flashing.

"Stop the vehicle," he heard a voice boom through a loudspeaker. "Richard Almaraes. Stop your vehicle immediately."

"Fuck this shit," Ritchie said, and pressed the pedal to the floor.

The Dodge's tired old engine revved and the needle crawled to eighty-five but no higher. That was the pick-up truck's upper limit.

The cop cars drew closer.

Ritchie eyed them in his rear-view mirrors. He could see the faces of the officers inside the cars. Cops all look alike, Ritchie had always thought. But this was ridiculous. Ritchie swore that the same cop was behind the wheel of every car. And in the shotgun seats. All of them had little black eyes and wavy dark hair and—

Jerry Hunt. He was being chased by Jerry Hunt, the dark-haired man.

Just like that, it all came spinning back on top of him: the dreams, the nightmares and the endless cycle of death and pain. All of it.

Ritchie's eyes had been locked on the rear view mirrors. Now, he hazarded a glance through the windshield in front of him.

A roadblock. Three police cars blocking every lane. Cops standing behind them, guns drawn, ready to blast him.

Each and every one of the officers was the Dark-Haired Man.

Ritchie slammed on the brakes.

In flagrant violation of the California Highway Code, he wasn't wearing a seat belt.

He went flying through the windshield.

And landed in the waiting room of the free clinic. Ritchie sat on one of the hard benches, head in his hands. He had suddenly come over all dizzy and thought he might throw up. He had come to the clinic for...

What had he come there for? He couldn't remember and felt awfully silly. But maybe this dizziness was a part of it. He couldn't seem to even open his eyes or raise his head up. Must be the flu or something like that. There was a lot of strange shit going around town at the moment.

"Mr Almares?" a voice called.

He forced his eyelids open and with a Herculean effort raised his head. Doctor Rosoff was standing there in front of him, a manila file tucked under one arm. He liked Doctor Rosoff; he felt that she somehow understood him better than any of the other doctors he'd been to see over the years. He looked up at her and managed a slight smile.

"Would you come with me, please?" she said, her face impassive.

Ritchie tried to stand up, but his legs were jelly. He took a deep breath and tried again with the same lack of result.

"I'm not feeling so good, Doc," he said.

"I'm not at all surprised," Doctor Rosoff replied. She reached down and grabbed him by the left bicep. She hauled him up on to his feet with surprising strength. His legs still felt weak, but Rosoff was able to support him and drag him along through the waiting room.

"Not one little bit surprised," she said again. "What with being a killer and all."

"What?!" Ritchie said.

He looked up at her, searching for some whimsy, a sign that she was joking with him.

She looked deadly serious.

"Ow!" Ritchie moaned as she dragged him down the corridor. "That hurts."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Doctor Rosoff told him.

Ritchie had a good look around him now for the first time. He studied the other patients waiting to see the doctors at the clinic. He

saw the usual array of ages and races, old men and little kids. All of them looking pathetic and uninsured. All of them looking pained and pissed-off.

All of them looking exactly like the dark-haired man.

"D-D-Doc," Ritchie sputtered.

They all tracked him with their beady little black eyes. They all snarled at him—or grinned sickly—with their thin, pale lips. Even the babies in their mothers' arms wore the face of the dark-haired man.

"You gotta help me, Doctor Rosoff," Ritchie begged.

"Not to worry, Ritchie, we've got just the medicine you need," she told him and kicked open the door to the exam room. She pushed Ritchie inside ahead of her. He stumbled across the threshold and crashed to his knees. He only managed to avoid smacking his face on the hard tile floor by catching hold of the examination table as he fell.

"Jeez, Doc," he said, "That's one hell of a bedside manner you've—"

He looked up.

Three doctors, all in white lab coats, stood with their backs to Ritchie. They all faced the front of the long counter top on the opposite side of the room. Each was filling a hypodermic needle from an ampoule. They performed the act in perfect synchronization, as if it were some new Olympic event. Doctor Rosoff stood watch in front of the door, arms crossed over her chest.

"What gives, Doc?" Ritchie asked. "I'm just feeling a little dizzy. Maybe I've got one of those new Asian flu bugs they're always talking about in the news."

The three white-coated doctors turned all at once. As if locked in step, each gave a squeeze on the end of his needle, sending a drop of liquid spurting into the air like ejaculate.

Each doctor bore the face of the dark-haired man.

"Lethal injection," Doctor Rosoff said. "It's the law in this state."

"No," Ritchie cried. "You've got the wrong guy."

"It is the most humane way," she explained. "The subject feels no pain at all. Well, hardly any pain. We can't really be certain, can we? Still, no one has ever complained afterward. Heh heh."

She laughed. The dark-haired doctors all laughed.

They advanced on him in formation.

Ritchie threw his hands over his eyes.

And screamed.

The sound vanished up into the air. Ritchie opened his eyes.

He was standing beside the swimming pool at the Hunts' mansion in Brentwood. The pool water was crystal clean, glistening in the bright noonday sun. Lying on an extravagant chaise lounge on the wooden deck was Mrs Hunt. She lay on her stomach soaking up the rays, her top undone and the bulk of her marvelous rear exposed to all and sundry thanks to one of Thog's miraculous thongs. Ritchie couldn't take his eyes off her tight, bronzed ass. Then he heard a sound like a leaking bicycle tire coming from behind him.

"Psssst."

He looked across the pool, and saw Cheto the gardener nodding at him, a lascivious leer plastered across his face. Cheto made an extremely obscene gesture with his hands then followed it with an action using his fingers and tongue, which Ritchie had never seen before and couldn't exactly interpret.

But he got the general idea.

"All done now, Mrs Hunt." Ritchie said.

She ignored him. He took a few steps closer, until he stood at the foot of the chaise lounge.

"Mrs Hunt? I'm all finished here."

She opened her eyes with a grunt of annoyance. She propped herself up on one arm, turning sideways to look at the pool guy. Her top dropped away, leaving her breasts exposed to him. She didn't seem to notice.

"Mitch, is it?"

"Ritchie," he said eyes glued to her tits. "My name is Ritchie."

"Whatever," she said. "What is it that you want now?"

He knew exactly what he wanted. From across the pool he could hear Cheto yelling: "Go for it, bro. Do her! Take that bitch, Pool Guy!"

Mrs Hunt either didn't hear him or couldn't be bothered.

"I'm all done with the pool," is all that Ritchie said.

"Do you want a round of applause?" she jeered.

"I'm supposed to get paid today. Mr Hunt promised. Cash, he told me."

"What about the rat?" Mrs Hunt asked.

"The rat?"

She rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Did you get rid of the rat?" She asked.

"I didn't see no rat," Ritchie told her.

Mrs Hunt looked at Ritchie, glanced at the pool and looked back at Ritchie.

"What do you call that then?" she asked. She casually waved her hand in the direction of the big swimming pool. Ritchie turned to look.

Lying on its back, kicking its legs in the air, was the biggest rat Ritchie had ever seen in his life. It was the size of a German shepherd, with whiskers as long as Ritchie's arm and black eyes as big around as softballs. The rat was swimming in a tidy, tight circle, spitting mouthfuls of water in regular bursts, like a park fountain as it did the backstroke.

"Oh," Ritchie said. "That rat."

"Yes," Mrs Hunt said. "That rat. Were you just going to leave it there? Is that what my husband is paying you for?"

"Okay. I'm on it," Ritchie told her. She rolled back over and closed her eyes again.

Ritchie watched the rat do the back float around the pool. He tried calling to it first: "Here, boy. Come on, Mr Rat. I got some nice cheese here. Eeek-eeek."

But the rat wasn't falling for that old trick. He wasn't born just yesterday.

Ritchie found his skimmer lying on the deck by the side of the pool. He extended the pole to its full length and tried to use the net at the end to snare one of the rat's jerking legs. But every time he managed to hook a paw, the rat just rolled over in the water, sliding itself free.

Then the rat started laughing at him.

Ritchie got mad. Who did this rat think he was laughing at him? No bastard rat was going to make a monkey out of Ritchie Almares!

"You're going to be sorry, you dirty rat," he warned.

The rat merely spat out an extra high fountain of pool water and went on about his happy business.

Then Cheto was suddenly standing next to him.

"Hey, Pool Guy," Cheto said. "That's some fine piece of rat, huh? That rat got eyes for you, bro, I can tell. You ever score any rat pussy?"

"Say what?" Ritchie asked.

"Hell, yeah! Them rats are hot. And they just asking for it, bro. Dressing like that, showing off their little rat booty. They want it, bro, you know they do. So go ahead and give that rat what it needs."

"How am I going to get rid of this thing?" Ritchie said.

"Aww, don't be that way," Cheto groaned.

"I'm not going to get paid if I don't get rid of it. Leonard's going to kill me."

"Use this then," Cheto said with a sigh. And he handed Ritchie a gun.

A big, black gun. Ritchie had seen it before, he was sure. But where?

"Shoot him in the cojones, man!" Cheto urged.

"Yeah. Okay," Ritchie said.

He turned back toward the pool, but the rat was gone. So was Cheto. And Mrs Hunt. Ritchie still held the gun in his hand.

An awful screeching racket came from behind him. Ritchie turned around and saw the rat standing on his hind legs, wearing a black Speedo bathing suit. The rat advanced on Ritchie.

Ritchie held up the gun, pulled the trigger.

His shot went way wide. He wasn't used to the recoil and the gun jerked out of his hand.

The rat looked really mad now. It looked...

Its eyes. The rat had those tiny, black eyes that bore into Ritchie.

The better to see you with, Ritchie heard in the back of his head.

The rat's red nose began to twitch. It snorted out a line of lime green rodent snot.

The better to smell you with.

Ritchie felt a raw and primal fear generated from deep within. He tried to back away, but found he was glued to the ground, his legs turned to pillars of stone.

The rat opened its mouth, revealing a spiky array of tiny sharp teeth.

The rat leapt and Ritchie screamed.

And he found himself in a white room. There was a bank of video monitors in front of him and a large mixing desk dotted with buttons and switches and joysticks. A big plasma screen covered one wall, and two humming black boxes sat along a third. The fourth wall was blank. Ritchie somehow expected a window to be there, but it was just a blank wall.

Ritchie knew he was in the control room of VirtuaCorp. And he felt very afraid.

On the desk in front of him was a lone CD jewel box case. The label on it read: *R ALMARES: ACTUAL*.

Ritchie picked it up, examined both sides. There was nothing else but that label and a single, silvery disk within. He didn't want to look at what was on that disk. He knew he didn't want to watch it.

He removed the disk, opened the tray on the console and placed it inside. He pressed the button and the tray whirred closed. The drive began to spin.

The "Play" button on the console lit up and Ritchie found he had no choice but to press the blinking green button. One screen on the bank of monitors lit up and Ritchie watched the scene unfold.

Ritchie is standing poolside at the Hunt place. He is wearing his usual Pool Guy uniform: dirty black shorts, a torn T-shirt and a raggedy old pair of flipflops. The pool is a filthy mess and the job is taking Ritchie twice as long as it should do. The Hunts must have had one whiz-bang of a pool party the night before and there is garbage strewn everywhere. Cigarette butts and roaches float on the

scummy surface of the water and Ritchie has already had to fish two dirty condoms out of the filter. Broken bits of glass litter the wooden deck and Ritchie has already stepped on a shard of a broken champagne bottle.

Ritchie hates these rich bastards with a white-hot passion. He hates having to work for them, to clean up after their parties. He hates being party only to the detritus of their wonderful lives, never getting any closer to the world of Dom Perignon than the splinters of broken bottle he has to pull out of his big toe.

Ritchie hates being a pool guy. He hates his life.

He gets out his skimmer and extends the pole as far as it goes. He starts to fish the floating garbage out of the deep end of the pool, scooping up a net full of cigarette butts, when the skimmer catches on something floating in the water. It is the stem of a broken wine glass and the jagged edge is very sharp. It cuts right through the netting and all the shit that Ritchie has so carefully skimmed out of the water plops back in and floats away.

Perfect, he says to himself, just what I needed.

He hauls the skimmer back in and examines it. It is useless. Tossing it aside, he walks back over to his pick-up truck to get the smaller one. He will have to wade into the pool to use it if he is going to be able to reach all the junk in the water. He hates that.

As he rummages through the shoddy tools and equipment in the back of his truck, Ritchie hears the front door of the Hunt mansion open. He peers around the side of the pick-up and sees Mrs Hunt emerge from the house. She is a hot little piece of ass and many is the night that Ritchie has laid in bed imagining the thousand and one uses he could put her to. Today she is wearing a tight micro-mini skirt that runs right up to Krakatoa—and wouldn't Ritchie love to see that erupt—and a narrow-cut silk jacket over a form hugging white blouse. Her long blonde hair shimmers in the California sunshine, framing her round, soft cheeks and a pair of pert crimson lips. She sees Ritchie looking at her and offers him a polite smile of recognition and a little wave of her hand.

He nods back at her and thinks genuinely nasty thoughts as she gets into her red Mercedes rag top and backs out down the driveway.

What do you have to do to get a woman like that, he wonders? But he already knows the answer; it's no secret in this town: You got to be one rich bastard.

Ritchie gets his skimmer and wades into the pool to clean out the scum of the Hunts' fabulous lives.

He steps on another piece of glass on the bottom of the pool and screams out a stream of vile curses in response. The too heavily chlorinated water—and whose fault is that?—feels like acid in the cut.

Ritchie hobbles out of the pool and sees to his injury. He is sitting down on the soft chaise lounge by the side of the pool when a shadow passes over him.

Mr Jerry Hunt looks down at the pool guy.

"You all right there, Mitch?" he asks.

The son of a bitch simply cannot get Ritchie's name right and it drives him crazy. Three times a week Ritchie cleans the bastard's pool and he can't even remember his name. Ritchie can't bring himself to look up at his employer.

"Ritchie," he says through clenched teeth. "It's Ritchie. And I cut myself on some glass in the pool. There's busted glass all over the place."

"Ritchie. Of course. Yeah, we had us quite a blowout last night," Hunt says. "Things got a little wild." And he sniggers. Hunt always sniggers. Never laughs or chuckles or guffaws. Just sniggers. Ritchie hated it.

"Got to be careful with glass," Ritchie says. He can't seem to slide the shard out of the sole of his right foot. It hurts like hell.

"Well, you know how these things go," Hunt says. Another snigger. "Par-tay, par-tay."

Ritchie doesn't have the faintest idea how "these things" go, or why Hunt pronounces "party" like he's one of the boys from the hood. Ritchie has never been any closer to a Brentwood mansion pool party than cleaning up the mess the next morning. Given the rancid circumstances of his life, he is thoroughly unlikely to ever get any closer.

"Uh-huh," he says.

"You should get that looked at," Mr Hunt tells him. He points at Ritchie's bleeding foot.

Ritchie finally looks up at Hunt then, to show his contempt, but he jumps back slightly.

"Shit!" Ritchie yells.

Hunt is holding a gun in his hand. He sniggers yet again.

"Oh, sorry there, Mi... Ritchie. Didn't mean to give you a start."

"For, Christ's sake, what are you doing with that?"

Hunt held up the big, black gun admiringly. He ran a hand down the long, smooth barrel in an almost masturbatory way.

"This is just an old friend of mine. Actually, we came out for a little hunt."

"What the hell are you hunting out here?" Ritchie asks.

"Rats," Hunt whispers. "Brentwood's overrun with them at the moment. The city council's going to pay dear for not dealing with it, don't you worry. Till then it's every man for himself and the rats against all. Have you seen any today? There was a big one that came out at the party last night. Damn near ruined the whole soiree. Ladies screaming... and not for the right reasons."

Another dirty snigger.

"No, I ain't seen no rats, Mr Hunt," Ritchie says. "Not any to shoot, at least."

The remark goes right over Hunt's head. He only ever half-listens to anything the likes of a pool guy says. Ritchie tries out a snigger of his own.

"Well, give us a holler if you see one," Hunt tells him, tapping his pistol again. "I'm going to go check out over by the dumpster. That's where we saw it last night. Then I'm heading out to the studio. Listen, make double sure you close that gate behind you today after you drive out. You forgot last time. Okay, Mitch?"

Motherfucker, Ritchie wanted to yell. He did not forget to close the gate. He's always doubly careful about details like that on the job. But he just nods and Mr Hunt starts to wander off. Then Ritchie remembers.

"Hey!" he calls out. "Hey, Mr Hunt!"

Jerry Hunt turned around, his one thick eyebrow raised, gun still in hand.

"We're supposed to settle up today, remember? You promised you'd have some cash for me this morning. You owe me for that extra week, too."

Hunt slapped a hand to his forehead in exaggerated, comical fashion. A dopey smirk took over his lips and another little snigger escapes.

"Oh, hell, Mitch, I entirely forgot about it. You're dead right, but the thing is that I haven't got any cash on me at all. I can write you a check—"

"No, no!" Ritchie yells. "Listen, I got to have cash and I need it today, Mr Hunt. I got rent due and a roommate who's a pain in the ass, you know? You promised you'd have cash for me today and I really got to have it. I'm depending on it."

"I do apologize, Mitch—"

"Ritchie! My goddamn name is Ritchie!"

"Sorry, sorry." Another snigger. "*Ritchie*. You're right, I promised you cash. But I simply don't have anything on me at this moment. Do you understand that? I'm not a big cash guy. Now, if you just give me your address, I will have an envelope with the cash couriered over to you later this afternoon after my meeting at the studio. Now, you can't beat that for an offer can you?"

Ritchie is still shaking his head. He *can* beat that. Cash now. In his hand. Clients have made promises to him before and they never deliver on them. No one ever remembers what they say to the pool guy. Out of sight, out of mind.

"I really have to go now," Hunt says. "Heap big meeting, don't you know. Just write your address down for me and leave it with Consuela, and I'll get it taken care of later today. Okay, Mitch?"

And he sniggers.

Ritchie simply snaps. He feels a cold and terrible fury take hold of him. He has cleaned spent condoms out of this bastard's pool. He has literally walked on glass for the man. And this is the thanks that he gets.

Ritchie goes after Hunt, who is already walking away. He steps down on his foot with the glass still in it, driving the shard deeper into the meat and sending a spike of pain straight up his leg.

Ritchie lets out a howl.

Hunt turns around and sees Ritchie stumble. He reaches out to try and help him, but takes a misstep himself on the wet decking. He trips into Ritchie, who is already off-balance and tumbles backwards into the pool.

At another time, in other circumstances, it might all be genuinely comical: a Keystone Kops routine of pratfalls. Hunt thinks it is hilarious. He can't help himself and he starts to laugh—a chain link of nasty little sniggers.

Ritchie doesn't see anything funny at all. He sees only a rich, sniggering son of a bitch. Laughing at *him*.

He sees furious red.

Ritchie hauls himself out of the pool. Every step he takes drives another spike of pain through his foot and sends his anger level soaring. Every snigger he hears from the now doubled-over Jerry Hunt feeds his sudden, overwhelming outrage.

He sees the broken pool skimmer lying on the ground. He picks it up and swings it over his head.

He smashes Hunt across the back of the head. Hunt goes flying across the decking, crashes into a glass table, shattering it. Glass flies everywhere. The gun tumbles out of Hunt's hand and lands on the chaise lounge.

"I want my money, you goddamn son of a bitch," Ritchie screams. He continues on after Hunt, the skimmer still in his hand. He uses it like a spear and pokes Hunt sharply in the ribs. The rich man screams. Ritchie flips the pole around again and swings it around, hitting Hunt on the other side of his head. A geyser of blood spurts up in the air.

"What's my name now, movie man? You remember my frigging name now?"

"Please," Hunt begs. Blood pours down his face from an open gash over his eye, blinding him.

Ritchie wades in and grabs Hunt by the collar of his silk shirt. He pulls his head back then slams it forward into the metal frame of the deck chair. Ritchie hears a snap, doesn't know if it is the chair or something in his employer's head.

He doesn't care. His fury is without end.

"All I want is what I'm owed," he screams. "All I want is what I deserve."

He launches a fierce kick at Hunt's groin. A high-pitched yowl of pain escapes Hunt's throat as Ritchie connects and he doubles over yet again.

"What do you say now, asshole? Rich guy, pool guy... Which would you rather be right now?"

Hunt can't believe what is happening to him. He is in horrendous pain. His balls are on fire, his ribs are broken and for sure he can feel something is rattling in his head.

Then he sees the gun on the chair. It is no more than four feet away. He reaches for it.

Ritchie sees him make the move. He raises his foot and stomps on Hunt's right hand. He loves the sound of all those little bones breaking.

"What were you going to do with that, asshole?" Ritchie screams. He picks up the gun himself. He is in another place entirely, a land borne of a life's store of anger and disappointment and self-loathing. Ritchie has entered some other, previously unknown dimension of his soul.

He likes it here.

He places the barrel of the gun against Hunt's belly. Fire is in his eyes. Hunt tries to shake his head, form a plea with his thin lips.

Ritchie, smiling, pulls the trigger.

Hunt jerks, falls to the ground on his back.

Ritchie glares down at the rich man's spasmodic body. He thinks about Mrs Hunt and aims the big black barrel at her husband's crotch.

He pulls the trigger again.

Three more times Ritchie pulls that trigger. He fires bullets into Jerry Hunt's heart and brain. The last one goes in the mouth and

pieces of the dead man's teeth explode out through his bloody cheeks.

And as suddenly as it came on Ritchie, the killing fury is gone. Jerry Hunt is dead, though. Ritchie, the pool guy, has killed him.

The image on the video screen froze: a close-up of Jerry Hunt's beaten, bullet-ridden corpse.

Ritchie, too, felt frozen. Frozen with the realization—the honest memory—of what he has done.

He knew the truth now. He remembered it all as it really happened, exactly as the images recorded on the disk showed him, and not as the distorted history rewritten by his willful self-delusions.

Ritchie stood up. He reached out to touch the monitor.

His hand passed right through the screen. Somehow the rest of his body followed suit.

He found himself standing poolside again. But Hunt's body had disappeared. There was only the calm, clean water and the slight hum of that expensive filter. No signs of the struggle he had just witnessed.

A voice called to Ritchie and he turned around.

Jerry Hunt, the dark-haired man of his nightmares—the man he murdered for no good reason at all—was standing there, mercilessly studying him with his dead, black eyes. His wavy hair began to billow in a sudden breeze.

Ritchie fell to his knees and folded his hands in front of him in a gesture of supplication.

"Please," he begged. "Please. I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to kill you. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I don't know what happened, I just... snapped. Please just don't shoot me anymore. Please just let this all end."

Ritchie collapsed into sobs. The dark-haired man walked over until he stood almost on top of Ritchie. He reached down and picked

Ritchie's head up by the hair and stared him dead in the eyes. He pressed the gun to the center of Ritchie's forehead.

"Wake up," he said, smiling his thin smile. "Wake up, wake up, wake up, wake up..."

The screaming, Ritchie knew, even as he heard himself commence it, was only just beginning.

It would never, ever stop.

TWELVE

VirtuaCorp's headquarters and center of operations does not even remotely resemble the quaint, Victorian house in Ritchie Almaraes's dream, either inside or out. There are no charming flower gardens or rococo gables or sharpened spikes on the non-existent stone walls. There is no bald receptionist playing solitaire all day.

And it is not located anywhere near Tarzana.

VirtuaCorp owns a large parcel of land just outside the incorporated limits of the city of Anaheim. The proprietors of Disneyland do not advertise the fact of this proximity. Indeed, if asked, they would no doubt express their wish that the VirtuaCorp building were in some other part of the state entirely. Not that anyone could possibly mistake VirtuaCorp for the Magic Kingdom. Though it is a place that was built on a great leap of imagination.

VirtuaCorp occupies a large, squat concrete structure with few windows and even fewer doors. It is the kind of unpleasant-looking building you drive by and think: Thank God I don't have to work in a carbuncle like that. And then you wonder: what the hell do they do in places like that?

The building is surrounded by an electrified double-perimeter fence and is further patrolled by extraordinarily vicious guard dogs that have been trained to kill. Bull-mastiffs, to be precise. Large warnings are signposted every ten feet around the edge of the property. The Chief Executive Officer at VirtuaCorp, Doctor Susan Rosoff (MD and PhD), insisted that such extreme security measures were entirely unnecessary given the precision of VirtuaCorp's procedures and the certitude of their operation, but the relevant authorities in the bureaucracy that is the California State Penal Authority insisted otherwise. The penal authorities like and are comfortable with—they comprehend and are comforted by the idea of—electrified fences and killer bull-mastiffs. Bureaucrats are always careful to cover their asses lest something goes wrong, of course; it is what makes them bureaucrats at heart. So in the end, however much

it discomfited her personal philosophies, Doctor Rosoff gave in and signed off on the extreme security measures.

Hell, the State was picking up most of the tab anyway. He who pays the piper calls the tune and all that jazz.

Despite the enormous expense of building and setting up the operation, the VirtuaCorp program was still officially regarded as in an "experimental" phase, though the doubters and disbelievers were slowly but surely coming around. VirtuaCorp had, after all, been initially established as a virtual reality game design company. A lot of people had a hard time accepting that they could also have developed an idea as important as Incarceratory Dream Therapy. Many had thought it some kind of sick joke at first, but Susan Rosoff, who was also the programming genius behind it all, proved a formidable and persuasive figure. It was said that it was she who charmed the governor into signing off on the program, and it was Rosoff whose steadfast belief in the efficacy of the Therapy made it all such a stunning success.

Doctor Rosoff took her job with deadly seriousness. She had done so when VirtuaCorp made games, and was even more dedicated now that the company had developed this new and potentially more lucrative line of operation. VirtuaCorp was still only allowed to deal with a small number of inmates: those who had been carefully selected on the basis of the crimes they had committed and a careful personality analysis that brought to light their potential susceptibility to the treatment. Richard Almares had scored almost perfectly on VirtuaCorp's complex diagnostic tests and numerous brain scans.

Naturally, Doctor Rosoff was not at all surprised by just how well Almares's therapy was proceeding. But she still had to do the hard work of convincing the remaining doubters among the bureaucrats that their Dream Therapy was serious business. They had to be shown that it did not represent some easy escape from traditional prisons with bars and concrete walls, but was in fact a *harsher* punishment for those who underwent it. Because ultimately, whatever might be dreamed of or imagined in their rational philosophies, most people wanted to know for sure that prison was about punishment and penalty; that it served to put the guilty

miscreants of the world in the lowly and awful place in which they truly belonged.

And that was why Susan Rosoff made certain that she herself met with the families of the victims of crime and showed and explained to them what VirtuaCorp's radical program was all about. She knew that if she could win over those who were most desirous of retribution for their loss and their suffering then everyone else would eventually follow. And the future potential—and earnings—for VirtuaCorp would be almost limitless.

So it was Doctor Rosoff who went to meet and greet the widow of the late studio executive Jerry Hunt. And it was Rosoff who employed all her forcefulness and persuasiveness and considerable intellect to show Mrs Hunt that Richard Almares was getting exactly what he deserved for the murder of her husband.

Sarah Hunt was not what Rosoff had been led to expect. Mrs Hunt truly did look like a million dollars (or rather, one hundred million, which was what the media reports had estimated the late Jerry Hunt to be worth), but she wasn't anything like the Hollywood trophy wife she had been painted to be in the gossip columns. She was tall and slim, her golden blonde hair impeccably coiffed in a cut that probably cost more money than a pool guy earned in a month, but there was something very prim and proper about her manner. She was still in official mourning, of course, and wore a stunning black suit that must have been personally designed and tailored to make manifest the seriousness of her grief without disguising the considerable voluptuousness of her form. Rosoff suspected that the suit cost more than even a director of VirtuaCorp made in a month. But then, that's Hollywood.

Rosoff was pleasantly surprised by Sarah Hunt as a person, though. Perhaps, she considered, she had allowed herself to become a little too immersed in the reconstructions of Ritchie's fantasies and had allowed the process of dredging through the awful things in the killer's head to influence her own thoughts and expectations. Such an issue could prove a considerable occupational hazard for all at VirtuaCorp who were concerned with the Dream Therapy. She made

a mental note to remember that and watch out for it in the future. Yes, a memo to key personnel was definitely in order about the issue.

She returned her attention to matters more immediately at hand.

"Over a period of time," Rosoff explained to Mrs Hunt, "we are able to extract key moments from the convict's memory. These moments and all the contextual images, sounds, smells, even feelings, can then be recorded. The recordings are then—"

"I just don't understand that," Sarah Hunt said. "How can you know for sure that what you are recording is accurate or true? How do you distinguish between perception and reality? And how can you even record it?"

Rosoff smiled. "Well, of course, the technical details of that process are something of a trade secret, as I'm sure you can understand. But in general terms, the leaps that VirtuaCorp has made in artificial intelligence, particularly through our key work in quantum processing, has opened up the doors to the human mind in a way that would have seemed impossible just a couple of years ago. The process is continually being refined and improved, don't get me wrong, but even now it has reached an enormously sophisticated level. Through our initial work on subjects who were able to provide entirely reliable verbal reports to corroborate the data collected by our software, we have shown categorically the information retrieved from the brain by our procedures is entirely accurate."

"So when a criminal insists he didn't do it—" Mrs Hunt started.

"What are mere words when we can tap directly into the brain itself?" Rosoff asked. "Who needs polygraphs or stress analyzers when we can just go ahead and open up the top of a perp's head and peer inside at what they really know and did? I am speaking figuratively, of course. No surgical interventions are required. Not anymore."

Mrs Hunt still did not look convinced. "But those recordings you showed me..."

"Mr Almarest's base memories, yes."

"Yes, all those disks with the different scenarios. I know that some of them weren't correct. I mean, those embarrassing images of me in his head... like some awful porn movie. That isn't real."

Rosoff cleared her throat. She was less than entirely comfortable with this area of discussion. In fact, she hadn't been at all certain that Mrs Hunt—or any of the victims and their relatives—should be allowed to view everything that is recorded. But the State authorities had been very insistent about the issue of one hundred per cent full disclosure, and simply wouldn't have it any other way. Rosoff thought that an additional memo on that subject would not go amiss either, and made another mental note to herself.

"As I started to explain a moment ago, we are able to locate and retrieve certain key moments from the memories of the subject. We are also able to determine, employing some highly sophisticated artificial intelligence software, which moments are certifiably true and accurate. After retrieving and recording these moments we are able to manipulate them and virtually recreate them inside the computer. Those recreated scenarios can then be reinserted in the subject's brain to experience as if they are themselves real."

"But—"

"Let me finish, please, Mrs Hunt. Then I will try to answer your questions. Actually, I have a better idea. Why don't you come with me?"

Rosoff led Mrs Hunt out of the small conference room and down the hall. They passed through two security checkpoints, where Rosoff, CEO or not, had to pass a retinal scan, and then down another lengthy corridor. Armed security guards manned each checkpoint. In the year that the program had been running, none had ever had recourse to draw a gun. Indeed, none had needed to so much as get out of his chair except to go to the bathroom. A final retinal scan brought Rosoff and Hunt into the VirtuaCorp control room. It looked remarkably like the room in which Ritchie found himself in his dreams, except for the windows looking out on the "treatment room."

"This is where we put it all together," Rosoff said. "Where the magic happens, to borrow a Hollywood phrase."

"It looks like a digital editing suite," Hunt said, looking around. Rosoff reminded herself that the woman knew the entertainment business.

"Exactly. In fact, the skeleton of a digital editing unit is part of this vast hulk of technology," Rosoff explained. "Each of the images recorded from the criminal's brain is stored on something very much like a DVD. These images can then be manipulated and enhanced through our digital imaging processes, and in effect cut together much as you might edit a motion picture. The newly fabricated scenes are then fed back into the brain of the subject to experience."

"But those pictures of me?" Rosoff asked.

"Yes. Once the new scenarios have been reintroduced into the subject's brain, there is a certain random factor entailed in how it actually plays out. The important details which we are authorized to implant cannot be changed or escaped by the prisoner, but the brain is a complex and a funny organ and we are not yet able to exert perfect control over every aspect of how the subject interprets the scenarios again following implantation."

"That sounds very flimsy, Doctor Rosoff," Hunt said, shaking her head.

"I assure you it is not. In fact, there are certain additional benefits to us that result from this slightly random factor. In the case of Mr Almaraes, for example, it provided us with information about a rape he committed several months before he murdered your husband. A young woman who, like Mr Almaraes, worked as a pool cleaner. Mr Almaraes has now been convicted of that crime as well and is awaiting sentencing, superfluous as it might be given his present circumstances. VirtuaCorp memory recordings have been declared fully admissible as evidence in California courts, you know."

Mrs Hunt nodded and let her gaze drift across the bank of monitors set into the wall. Several displayed freeze-frame images that she recognized from the disks she had already viewed. Only one monitor had a moving image. It showed Ritchie running hard down a dark street. He looked panicky and out of breath. A graphic on the bottom flashed: CURRENT.

"Is that what he is... seeing now?" Hunt asked.

Rosoff nodded. "Yes that is the live feed. Do you understand what we've been doing to him?"

"Well..."

"I'll go through it again. In the case of your husband's killer we've designed a classic repeating dream scenario. It's a multi-phase sequence as per his sentence. In each and every scenario the convict undergoes the experience of being murdered himself, in the same manner in which he carried out his crime. Thus, Mr Almaraes experiences the act of being shot at point blank range. Each scenario differs slightly with regard to the murder act. This, too, is as per the instructions of the court. Since the convict..." Rosoff considered the most delicate way to phrase it. "Since his assault on your husband took a particularly varied and brutal form, Mr Almaraes is being subjected to the full range of brutalities which he so blithely handed out in the commission of the murder. And, of course, in each case it is the face of your husband who the convict sees committing the act as he is murdered."

"But..." Mrs Hunt bit her lip.

"Yes? Please do ask whatever you want to."

Hunt gestured at the vast array of computers and electronics. "Does all of this... does it truly feel real to him?"

"One hundred per cent," Rosoff said. She offered a thin and slightly frightening smile to her companion. (Even Doctor Rosoff didn't know that the boys in her virtual graphics division. used that very smile as the model for the one the dark-haired man repeatedly showed to Ritchie. Though in truth, the economy of it would have made her proud if she had known.) She added: "Mr Almaraes has now been through the 'acceptance' phase of his sentence. He has been subjected to a series of replays designed to break down his resistance and inability to acknowledge the fact of his crime and his proven guilt. I confess that he has been a particularly tough nut to crack in this regard, but they all crack in the end. As he now has.

"We are just now beginning to subject the prisoner to the 'retribution' phase of his therapy. In the course of this part of the program he will experience the forty-seven additional deaths to which he has been sentenced by the court. Each of these has been carefully designed to be more traumatizing than the last. As I think you have. been told, these scenarios do not specifically relate to the

actual murder that he committed, but have been created to inflict maximum psychological distress."

Mrs Hunt looked slightly dubious again. Rosoff patted her on the arm.

"We really do employ a crack team of writers and artists to dream these things up," she explained. "One of the writers worked on those Freddy movies, you know."

"I see," Mrs Hunt said, nodding.

"And of course at the end of the retribution phase we initiate the full personality wipe and rewrite. That is the most painful and dangerous element of the therapy—though we've only suffered one fatality so far. But ultimately it is this component of the therapy that validates, at least in the eyes of the criminal justice system, the entire procedure. It is our hope and sincere belief that within a decade the VirtuaCorp program that you have seen working here today will make prisons as we know them obsolete."

"Hard to believe," Mrs Hunt said, shaking her head.

This one is a hard sell, Rosoff thought. Show people!

"It is a bit irregular," Doctor Rosoff sighed, "but let me show you one more thing. I think you deserve it and frankly need it to be entirely reassured by what we are doing here."

Doctor Rosoff led her charge back out of the control room and down another lengthy corridor. They passed through another security checkpoint and came to a door at the very end of the hall. The door was as big and thick as a bulkhead and had a small square of glass set in the middle. Rosoff looked through the window, nodded to herself then gestured for Mrs Hunt to step up and take a look.

"Unfortunately, I can't legally allow you to go inside," Rosoff said, "but I think this will suffice."

Mrs Hunt nervously approached the door and looked through the window. Rosoff heard her emit a slight gasp.

Inside the room, Ritchie Almaraes dangled from a large steel frame that looked like some medieval torture device. His naked body was encased in a series of thin, white wrappings with scores of tiny wires poking out. His head was encased in a black helmet with dozens more electrodes sticking out, the wires snaking off into the steel

frame. His arms and legs were attached to spring-like devices that enabled movement, but kept him confined in his suspended position. His arms and legs were pumping away as if he was running for all he was worth from the teeming hordes of the devil himself. Ritchie's face was just visible under the helmet. His eyes were covered by a tight-fitting visor, but his mouth was drawn back in an expression of unmitigated horror. He was very likely screaming—it certainly looked that way to Mrs Hunt—but the door and glass were too thick to hear through.

If he isn't screaming, Sarah Hunt thought, he certainly looks like he should be.

She found that thought to be very comforting.

Very comforting indeed.

"What do you think?" Rosoff asked.

"Impressive," Mrs Hunt said. "Most impressive."

Thank God, Rosoff thought. She said: "Perhaps you'd like to come back with me now. I can offer you a cappuccino. And we have some lovely Danish."

They walked back down the corridor.

In his dreams—in his reality; for there was no longer any discernible difference to him—Ritchie Almares existed as nothing more than a fleshy mass of fear. In a terrifying darkness he ran and he screamed. His heart pounded, his body was racked with pain and his soul was in torment. He didn't know what he was running from or why he was screaming. He couldn't see any place of safety, any haven he might possibly flee to.

He knew only terror and pain.

And somewhere, somehow deep within what was left of himself, Ritchie Almares knew he deserved all the terror that he felt.

He screamed some more.

Ritchie Almaraes's prison has no walls, no bars, not even a single guard... It's simply a state of mind from which there can be no escape... in The Twilight Zone.